

## Lynchpin

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# Lynchpin

by [ShanaStoryteller](#)

## Summary

He can't get Jin Guangyao's words out of his head.

If he'd only believed in Wei Wuxian, if he'd only been willing to stand up for him, could it all have been avoided?

- Translation into Magyar available: [Lynchpin – Kulcspon](#) by [Hickory\\_\(andreacsenge\)](#).
- Translation into Türkçe available: [Lynchpin \(TÜRKÇE ÇEVİRİ\)](#) by [zeynepmaster](#)

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jiang Cheng can't get Jin Guangyao's words out of his head.

It's been almost a year. Things have settled as much as they're ever going to settle. Madame Jin is leading the sect until Jin Ling is older, something Jiang Cheng feels guilty about being as relieved about as he is. Lan Xichen is in seclusion still, leaving Lan Wangji to act as both as the Lan sect leader and the Chief Cultivator. He's still not totally sure how that last one happened, but he's pretty sure after the last three people who held the title were Wen Ruohan, Jin Guangshan, and Jin Guangyao, it's possible that everyone's just running with the idea that it's a cursed position and Lan Wangji is welcome to it.

Wei Wuxian is in Cloud Recesses. Apparently he and Lan Wangji call each other husband now, but if there'd been a ceremony then he hadn't been invited to it. He's almost entirely sure that the only reason Lan Wangji agreed to take the position of Chief Cultivator was to better protect Wei Wuxian from – well, everything.

They still haven't spoken since the temple. It's mostly his fault, he knows, because Wei Wuxian has come to Yunmeng several times. Jin Ling has seen and even gone night hunting with him. Jiang Cheng knows this even though no one's ever told him because those are the nights that Jin Ling leaves Fairy behind. The only reason he lets his nephew get away with that is if Wei Wuxian can't handle something, having Fairy there is hardly going to make a difference.

Jin Ling doesn't say anything about it, but he knows that Jiang Cheng knows, and he always spends a moment too long looking at him before he leaves and when he comes back, as if he's trying to give him the space to ask, to let Jin Ling talk about his other uncle, the one he's forgiven and for some reason Jiang Cheng hasn't.

But Jiang Cheng never does. He just nods at Jin Ling and says nothing.

It's been nearly a year and he can't get Jin Guangyao's words out of his head.

Jiang Cheng has always known he's his mother's son and it used to terrify him.

He has her temper, her cold temperament, and as an adult he understands his mother better than he had as a child. He has an ocean of contempt for everyone around him and his affection always ends up coming out as anger, and that's been true his whole life. He used to stuff it down, try to control it, because he may have loved his mother but he hadn't wanted to be like her. He's learned to use it in his time as sect leader, to not bother pretending to care about things and people he doesn't. If he has a reputation for being loud and disagreeable, good. It means the other clans don't try and pull things over him anymore, they don't try to flatter or cajole him into doing what he doesn't want to do because they know it won't work. He doesn't have the patience for any of that crap.

He holds on too tightly to the people who matter to him, like trying to hold sand in his fist, the tighter he holds them the faster they leave him. Not that he's tried all that hard to care about anyone these past couple decades, he'd learned his lesson about that. Except for his nephew. He got lucky when it came to Jin Ling. He may be a mischievous, disobedient brat determined to scare his uncle into an early grave, but just like his mother he sees through Jiang Cheng's bluster and takes what he means over what he says.

He's lost everyone else, in one way or another. And according to Jin Guangyao, it's his fault.

Could he really have prevented it all? Was he partly to blame for the way everything had gone so horribly wrong? If he'd only believed in Wei Wuxian, if he'd only been willing to stand up for him, could it all have been avoided? Would Jin Ling have grown up with actual parents and not one uncle who didn't know what the fuck he was doing and another uncle that had probably been sabotaging any progress he'd made at turning Jin Ling into something resembling a well functioning kid?

The rumors and snarky comments about Jin Ling's lack of proper parenting had stopped. He wonders if that's because they'd been fueled by Jin Guangyao. Or maybe it's because now he's the nephew of the Yiling Patriarch.

Jin Ling has grown a lot this past year. Maybe it's because Jin Guangyao is gone. Maybe it's because Wei Wuxian is here and when it comes to parenting, like everything else their whole lives, he's better at this than Jiang Cheng is.

He can't stop thinking about it, and he can't face Wei Wuxian with that still running through his mind, so he hasn't. How can he look his brother in the face knowing that he could have prevented all this suffering if only he'd fought for him? How can he look at himself?

It's gotten to a point where he knows he can't keep living like this.

So he decides that he won't.

When it comes to doing the impossible, he used to know only one person who could manage that, and it's the one he's not speaking to. But now he knows of one more. Not that anyone *told* him of course, because as usual no one tells him fucking anything, but even he can put two and two together.

Nie Huaisang ducks behind his fan before Jiang Cheng has even finished asking his question and he doesn't even bother to restrain himself from rubbing at his temples. "I really don't have the patience for your theatrics right now."

"When do you have the patience for anything?" Nie Huaisang mutters, but snaps his fan shut, only to start tapping it against his open palm a moment later. Jiang Cheng starts mentally counting down from a hundred. That's never helped him before, but there's a first time for everything. "You know I'm not – I took the ritual from Wei Wuxian's notes. I didn't make it myself."

"You understood it," he says simply. It's more than he could have done, more than anyone else could have done. Even Lan Wangji doesn't fully understand demonic cultivation and all



of Wei Wuxian's strange inventions. "You're really telling me, after everything that happened, that Wei Wuxian hadn't tinkered with the idea at all."

His fan comes back out again, hiding his face, but when he peeks over it he looks thoughtful. "Maybe. For you."

He raises an eyebrow.

Nie Huaisang taps the center of Jiang Cheng's chest with his fan. "You and Wei Wuxian share a core. It's possible that I could – but it would be risky."

"That's fine," he answers. It's clearly not the answer Nie Huaisang was expecting.

"Why does this matter to you?" Nie Huaisang asks after a long, tense moment where Nie Huaisang looks surprised and Jiang Cheng tries not to show how offended he is by that. "Why should I do it? It could kill you. It probably will kill you, and I'm not likely to live long after in either case." He blinks, and Nie Huaisang clarifies, "Wei Wuxian will kill me for taking you away from him. It won't matter to him that he's barely seen you since he's been back."

Jiang Cheng closes his eyes at that, just for a moment, and when he opens them again Nie Huaisang almost looks thoughtful. "That's why."

It's not all of it, but it's part of it. The other part is maybe he can fix this. He'd thought that everything that had gone wrong had been too big, too unmanageable for any one person to help, but Jin Guangyao thought differently. And regardless of the type of man he'd been, he'd consistently been right about things like this, easily moving people like game board pieces time and time again.

If it's possible that he can save his sister, that he could save Jin Zixuan, that he could save Wei Wuxian – well, then he has to try, doesn't he?

Nie Huaisang's fan snaps open again, hiding the smile that Jiang Cheng can see in his eyes. "Very well."

~

Nie Huaisang is actually a little scary. It's not even a month later that he travels to Lotus Pier and slaps a scroll onto his desk, flush with victory and eyes alight with an intelligence he doesn't usually let himself show.

It's possible, but for Jiang Cheng alone. There are limitations.

He can't go back before the core transfer, since him having Wei Wuxian's core is what makes this all possible in the first place. But it'll need to be at a time when he'll be in the same physical location as Wei Wuxian, he'll need to have him in his eyeline for this to have the best chance of working.

Doing it right after the golden core transfer is too much of a risk, since technically he'd be in his eyeline, but only if Jiang Cheng was capable of opening his eyes before Wei Wuxian left,

which doesn't exactly seem likely. Which means that it'll have to be on the night that Wei Wuxian killed Wen Chao

"But he'll already have," Jiang Cheng starts, then cuts himself off.

"He'll have spent those three months being tortured in the Burial Mounds," Nie Huaisang says grimly. "I know. But it's not like there's any point in you going back if he hasn't. Without Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation, we never would have won the war."

Jiang Cheng flinches. It's true, after all. Wei Wuxian had won the war for them, and they'd destroyed him for it.

"Okay," he says, quietly letting go of the idea that he can save his parents, save all those that had died at Lotus Pier. He'll just have to save Wei Wuxian and hope that's enough to save everyone else.

"We'll need Wei Wuxian here to do the ritual," he says, "but you'll have no trouble with that."

He won't. If he invites Wei Wuxian to Lotus Pier, he knows that he'll come. He knows that, even after everything, even past the point any reasonable person would hate him, that his brother still loves him. He knows Wei Wuxian will be nervous and excited and *happy* to step back into his home, even if he thinks Jiang Cheng will yell at him again. "Why are you doing this?"

For once, Nie Huaisang is completely serious. "Because you're going to save my brother."

It's not a request, or a question. It's a statement. It's what's going to happen as far as Nie Huaisang is concerned.

Jiang Cheng nods and says, "Yeah," anyway.

It's only fair. If Nie Huaisang is going to help him save his brother, then Jiang Cheng can help him save his.

~

Wei Wuxian is smiling and happy, hanging off of Lan Wangji's arm and talking excitedly to Jin Ling.

Seeing how thrilled he is to be invited back to Lotus Pier, without a hint of bitterness or resentment, makes Jiang Cheng want to curl up and die somewhere. Apparently Wei Wuxian is incapable of holding literally anything against him.

Except maybe what he's about to do.

He only feels a little bit bad about drugging everyone's tea. Even after a year of not being on the run, Wei Wuxian is still too easy for him to pick up, and he doesn't think he can blame that entirely on the bland food of Gusu Lan. Even though he's been dead for sixteen years, Wei Wuxian still seems like his annoying big brother, knowing everything and being better

than him at everything. Except now, when he's too light in his arms and his head is against Jiang Cheng's shoulder. Like this, Wei Wuxian almost reminds him of Jin Ling.

Nie Huaisang barely glances up when he comes in and places Wei Wuxian carefully on the table in the center of the room. He uses Zidian to tie Wei Wuxian to the table. He has to be awake for this and Jiang Cheng has to be sure he won't be able to get up and stop him.

"Are you ready?" Nie Huaisang asks. "Remember, pour your whole core into it. Don't hold anything back."

"I know," he bites out, then lets out a slow breath. "Thank you. For this."

He hides his face behind his fan again then says, "Good luck," before slipping out the door.

Jiang Cheng uses a jolt of spiritual energy to wake Wei Wuxian up, watching his face slowly blink to awareness. "Jiang Cheng?" he asks as he looks around. "What's going on?"

He doesn't answer. He just gets to work, slicing thick wounds over the center of his palms.

He sees the exact moment Wei Wuxian recognizes the sigils, the placements, everything. His face drains of color and he struggles against Zidian, although of course it doesn't budge an inch. "You can't do this! It's too dangerous! How did you even – it doesn't matter, stop, it'll kill you!"

"If this doesn't work and I never see you again," Jiang Cheng starts, and then has to pause to swallow, "then I'm sorry. And thank you."

Wei Wuxian stills, mouth dropping open, but then he just fights against his binding even harder. "JIANG CHENG! Don't do this, stop, please--"

He slams his hands against the sigils, pushing every last drop of spiritual energy he has into them.

Everything goes dark.

~

He'd thought there'd be some in between state, like waking up after a long sleep.

Instead one moment he's listening to his brother pleas, and the next he's crouched on a roof next to Lan Wangji, staring through a hole in the roof and just barely able to see Wei Wuxian through it.

His first thought is stunned, thrilled surprise that it worked.

His second is how *young* they are.

Cultivators as powerful as they are don't age, not really, not if they don't want to. But there is a weight to them, a presence that they take on as the years pass. But all of that is gone now. They're barely older than Jin Ling.

Gods above, what was anyone thinking, letting them spearhead a war campaign? Probably that they didn't have a choice, but still. He doesn't even let Jin Ling night hunt on his own, and right then he can almost forgive his parents for trapping them on a boat and sending them away. He'd do the same thing in their place.

His third thought is that he must have been an actual idiot at this age not to see how close Wei Wuxian was to breaking. Just a glimpse of his face through a crack in the roof is enough for him to see that something is wrong, to see his brother's normally expressive face closed off and tainted with rage.

But that's not exactly fair. Wei Wuxian had been keeping it from him, and it's not like he'd been in the best head space back then. Or now. It's possible that he's the least well adjusted of his siblings, which is saying a lot what with Wei Wuxian right there, and explains more than a couple of things about Jin Ling. Besides, he'd known something was wrong back then, but Wei Wuxian wouldn't talk to him, and he hadn't known what to do about it. He still isn't entirely sure what he's going to do about it.

Even though he's seen all this and more before, it still sends a chill down Jiang Cheng's spine. He'd almost forgotten how powerful Wei Wuxian was with the Stygian Tiger Seal. He's powerful without it, still someone that no one is quite willing to cross even when he's supposedly retired and settled down with his husband and son, but with the seal – Wen Zhuliu is one of their strongest enemies, and Wei Wuxian is just playing with him.

Last time, when Wen Zhuliu had reached for Wei Wuxian, he'd been terrified he was going to watch his brother's golden core get crushed right in front of him and hadn't understood why Wei Wuxian was just standing there.

This time he knows it's because Wei Wuxian doesn't have a core. He knows that Wei Wuxian is planning to let Wen Zhuliu grab him just so he can watch the look on his face when Wen Zhuliu realizes that he doesn't have a core to steal, and then he's going to kill him. But Lan Wangji is right next to him, so he can't let that happen, because then he'll know that Wei Wuxian's core is gone.

Even if he'd been willing to let Wei Wuxian handle it, Lan Wangji isn't, bursting through the ceiling as Wen Zhuliu is inches from grabbing his brother's throat. Jiang Cheng does just as he did last time, pulling Wen Zhuliu back with Zidian and stringing him up with one of the rafters. He'd let him suffocate last time, but he doesn't have the patience for it this time around, and he has a better grasp on Zidian than he did the before anyway. He sends a surge of spiritual energy through Zidian and yanks his arm back. The whip cuts through skin and bone, slicing Wen Zhuliu's head clean off, and both his head and body fall to the ground even as Zidian retreats back to curl around his wrist.

Now they're all staring at each other, Wei Wuxian's eyes wide and his mouth parted in surprise as he looks between Wen Zhuliu's beheaded corpse and Jiang Cheng.

Suibian burns against his back, but he can't bring himself to do as he did last time and throw it back to him, not when he knows that Wei Wuxian can't wield it. He means to ask the same question as he did before, to ask where he's been because there's no good reason not to ask him, even though he already knows the answer.

He'd had plans. He'd thought about this. But now that he's standing in front of his brother again, back in a time before everything between them had gone to shit, he can't think of them. He doesn't throw the sword, he doesn't ask any questions, instead he does the one thing he'd done right last time.

He marches up to Wei Wuxian, who flinches as if he's expecting a blow. Jiang Cheng doesn't let himself dwell on that before he wraps his arms around Wei Wuxian's shoulders and crushes him against his chest.

Fuck, he's so thin, he's almost worried he's going to break him. Jiang Cheng doesn't realize he's said that out loud until Wei Wuxian lets out a soft sound that might have been a laugh once. "I," he has to stop and clear his throat, because his eyes are burning, and he'd managed to not be an absolute embarrassment last time around, but it looks like that's off the table for this one. "You," he starts, but doesn't know where to go from there. He doesn't know whether to try and tease him about being gone so long or to get genuinely mad about it, isn't sure which one will get his brother to really open up to him this time, and he feels stuck, paralyzed at the idea of making the wrong move.

Wei Wuxian's arms tentatively come up around him, something that hadn't happened last time, and it turns out that he's rather pathetic, because even with everything, even being an adult two decades his senior, something unclenches in his chest at being held by his big brother.

He presses his face into the crook of Wei Wuxian's neck, trying to at least hide his reaction from Lan Wangji. Mostly Wei Wuxian smells like clean sweat and oranges, for some reason, but underneath all that is the faintest whiff of sulphur, left over from the demonic cultivation he'd just used.

"Hey," Wei Wuxian says, rubbing circles into his back, "is everything – are you – is it Shijie? I thought-"

"A-jie's safe," he says, and nearly breaks down into actual sobs at being able to say that. A-jie is alive. This time she's going to stay alive. "But you – I thought – and we heard," he gives up, shaking his head and just clinging to Wei Wuxian even more tightly. He's a little bit worried that he's going to crack a rib, and also that he looks insane, but he's not just crying for Wei Wuxian being gone for three months, but for all of them, for all the suffering and shit that he has to prevent, and for not doing this the first time, for not stubbornly clinging to his brother back then until he'd hugged him back.

Instead of tensing, or becoming uncomfortable, Wei Wuxian relaxes in his arms, and somehow the balance is shifted, with Wei Wuxian cradling him against his chest instead of the other way around. Of course, he's an idiot, his brother has always been more comfortable taking care of others than he was at being taken care of. "I heard about what you've been doing. Fighting, and building the Jiang Sect back up. Thank you."

Mostly he'd just recalled all the members of their clan who'd been away from home and recruited some more from the civilians of Yunmeng. It wasn't much, but it was enough that they weren't actually wiped out, it's enough to build them into a large clan again one day. "It would have been easier with you," he says, which is true. He's not good at talking to people,

and he'd been too scared to let A-jie do it, so it'd most been him trying to convince people to follow him, which he wasn't spectacular at. He'd felt Wei Wuxian's absence most keenly then, when he knows his brother could have charmed all those people into following them into their clan and the war with both hands tied behind his back.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian says, "I don't know about that, all I do is cause you trouble anyway."

Jiang Cheng finally pulls back, rubbing his arm over his eyes. The ritual worked, neither of his siblings are dead, and he's going to keep it that way. There's no reason for his tears. "I've *missed* you getting me into trouble! That's what happens when you're away too long," he says, pushing his shoulder, and the skin around Wei Wuxian's eyes softens, just a little.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji says. Jiang Cheng has to work to keep his face straight. After the way he'd carried on for so long, he'd forgotten how *angry* Lan Wangji had been in the beginning. "We have your sword."

A flicker of something and then it's gone. Jiang Cheng can't even begin to interpret it and he has all the context for it this time around. "Oh?"

"Right, sorry," he slides the sword out his belt and holds it out to him. "We raided the Wens and got them all back. Here, I'm getting sick of people always asking about why I have two swords anyway."

Wei Wuxian doesn't take it. "You've just been carrying Suibian around this whole time?"

He hadn't asked last time, either not getting the implication or not caring. "Well, what was I supposed to do with it? Stick it in a trunk? Of course I carried it." He'd wanted his brother by his side and he'd been half convinced that having Suibian at his hip was as close as he'd ever get, but there's no way he can say that to Wei Wuxian.

"What if you never found me?" he asks, and his voice is teasing but his eyes are serious. "Were you going to just carry it around forever?"

Would he have? Would he have carried around a reminder of his dead brother for the rest of his life? Well, he'd kept Wei Wuxian's damn flute, kept it in his room and held it when he felt lost, and that was when he'd thought his brother had gone mad.

"Probably, yeah," he says, then uses Suibian to whack Wei Wuxian in the arm. "Asshole! You were always planning to come home, weren't you?"

Wasn't he? Or if they hadn't found him would Wei Wuxian have ended the war from the shadows and just never left them?

He nods, just once, but it's enough that Jiang Cheng can breathe again. He takes Suibian, looking it over, and then steps closer to stick it back in Jiang Cheng's belt. "Here, my arms are tired, you carry it."

He rolls his eyes and crosses his arms, but doesn't protest. Pressing the issue of Suibian last time had been one of the things that drove them apart and he's trying really hard not to make

the same mistakes twice. “You learn a couple tricks and get lazy, I see how it is.”

“Wei Ying.” Even Jiang Cheng wants to stand straighter at Lan Wangji’s tone. “Carry your sword.”

Wei Wuxian, or course, isn’t affected at all and barely restrains himself from rolling his eyes. “I’m tired.”

“Been busy these past couple days?” Lan Wangji asks. “Was it you who killed all the Wens?”

Jiang Cheng had thought Lan Wangji was angry when he’d been here last, but he’s got two more decades of experience reading other people now, and it turns out he’s terrified.

Wei Wuxian looks at his nails, disinterested. “So what if it was?”

“Wei Ying!”

Jiang Cheng doesn’t realize he’s stepping in front of his brother until he finds himself the focus of Lan Wangji’s angry gaze. He doesn’t personally care if his brother and his brother’s future husband have this fight, except he does, because he cares about his brother and knows that this misunderstanding was something that ended up making things harder for both of them. Lan Wangji loves his brother. If Jiang Cheng can get him on his side, on their side, keeping Wei Wuxian out of the Burial Mounds and out of too much trouble might just be that much easier. “Enough. So what if he did? It’s what we were planning to do after all. Why do you care if he did?”

“The *way* he did it,” he hisses. “These wicked tricks-”

No, it’s talk like that that caused the problem to begin with. “You’ve seen practitioners of wicked tricks before. They get all twisted, both inside and out. Does my brother look twisted to you?” He pauses, glancing back over his shoulder at Wei Wuxian, who’s looking at him a little startled, some of his hard edges giving way to surprise. “Well, I suppose he’s pretty ugly, but that can’t be helped.”

Wei Wuxian actually cracks a smile. Maybe he can do this.

Lan Wangji shakes his head. “The toll it takes on the body and mind-”

“How much worse can it get really?” he asks, trying to channel his brother, since he’s the only he knows who can get a rise out of Lan Wangji, and he needs him to lose his temper if he’s going to show Wei Wuxian that Lan Wangji isn’t angry for the reason his brother thinks he is, that he isn’t angry at all.

Wei Wuxian makes a sound that could be taken as a laugh at that.

“This isn’t a joke!” Lan Wangji insists, then looks over his shoulder at his brother. “Come back to Gusu with me.”

“If he decides he wants your help, or if I decide he needs it as his sect leader, that’s one thing,” he says, mostly trying to get the idea that Lan Wangji is trying to punish him out of

Wei Wuxian's head, "but he belongs to the Jiang Clan. He hasn't even seen our sister yet, and you already want to take him away? For what? To treat him for an illness he doesn't have?"

"No one has ever used this type of cultivation without it harming them," Lan Wangji says, a hair's breath below shouting. "Do you truly care more about winning this war than about Wei Ying? Will you watch him sicken and die just for his power?"

He snarls, Zidian sparking to life on his hand, and then Wei Wuxian is in between them, a hand on both their chests as he shoves them apart. "Hey hey hey, okay, everyone calm down!" Wei Wuxian almost doesn't look brittle anymore, smiling uncertainly as he looks between them. "I'm not going to sicken and die, Lan Zhan." Wei Wuxian hadn't called him Lan Zhan the first time they were here. "I know what I'm doing. Jiang Cheng, put Zidian away, Lan Zhan didn't mean that."

"I did," Lan Wangji says, and Jiang Cheng doesn't need the Zidian, he's going to wring this twerp's skinny neck with his bare hands. "How can he call himself your brother if he won't put your well being above his ambition?"

"Technically, we're not-"

Jiang Cheng isn't going to let Wei Wuxian finish that sentence. "I *trust* my brother, that's why! If he says he's controlling it, then he's controlling it, and you don't get to whisk him away and hide him in your stupid freezing healing springs just because you're worried. I've been worried practically since the day he moved in! The first thing he did was run away and worry me half to death and then the idiot went and broke his ankle and he'd been with us only a few days. I've been worrying about him for fifteen fucking years, so get over yourself!"

He's never really gotten into a proper argument with Lan Wangji before, so he hadn't known that he'd get under his skin like this. They're still glaring at each other which means he almost misses it when Wei Wuxian takes his hands off both their chest and covers his face with them. His shoulders shake and for a horrified moment he thinks Wei Wuxian is crying, that somehow he's managed to fuck up even more than last time, but when he lowers his hands he sees that he's laughing.

Jiang Cheng doesn't know how long it had taken for Wei Wuxian to laugh the first time around.

He's not naïve enough to think that it's enough, that a moment of humor means that his brother is any less lost or hurt, but he can't help smiling at it, at seeing Wei Wuxian happy even if it's just for a moment.

"Alright, alright," Wei Wuxian says, holding up his hands like they're both a pair of wild animals. Jiang Cheng can see his offense reflected in Lan Wangji's face. "No one's taking me anywhere, alright? It's fine. I don't think drowning me in a healing spring will do any good anyway."

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji says, but it's not as sharp as it was before. Clearly Jiang Cheng's not the only one affected by his brother's laughter.



Whatever he was going to say is interrupted by a whimpering in the corner of the room and they all turn to look.

Right. He'd nearly forgotten about Wen Chao.

"Lan Wangji," he says formally, like they hadn't just been at each other's throats moments earlier. "Please leave us. This is a matter that should be left to the Jiang Clan." Lan Wangji's lips press into a thin line and his back goes even stiffer than normal, which he hadn't thought was possible. He takes pity on him. "I'm sure we'll see you in Qinghe. He won't disappear again. I won't let him."

Lan Wangji looks from him to his brother and back, and it almost seems like he wants to say something, but he only nods and bows before going out the door.

Wei Wuxian lets the silence stretch between them for a moment before asking, "Are you guys always like that? You got along at Cloud Recesses."

"We didn't talk at Cloud Recesses," he corrects. And besides, he'd kind of hated Lan Wangji back then too. Wei Wuxian had been obsessed with him and Jiang Cheng had been freaking out that Wei Wuxian was going to choose irritating the Second Jade of Lan over coming home to Lotus Pier. It'd almost be funny if it didn't make him want to start crying all over again. "And no, but we haven't had anything to fight about before. We were both just running around trying to find you."

He ducks his head then looks back up. "Thanks. For – for. You seem – I thought you'd be less okay. With this."

"I'm not okay with it," he answers, probably too honest by the way Wei Wuxian's face drops. "I just know better than to think that that's enough to stop you. If you're going to do something weird and dangerous, I prefer being nearby. It makes it easier to clean up whatever mess you inevitably make."

Wei Wuxian rolls his eyes and knocks his shoulders into Jiang Cheng's before the levity drains from his face. He jerks his chin at Wen Chao. "What are you going to do about him?"

Last time he'd just stuck his sword in Wen Chao's heart and been done with it. This time he crosses his arms and shrugs. "Finish what you started."

"What I," he touches his flute. "Are you sure? Don't you want to-"

"He killed our family," he says, hard. "You were planning to make him suffer. You've already made him suffer. So finish what you started. You are as much of Yunmeng Jiang as I am. Revenge carried out by you is revenge carried out by me."

For some reason, he's still hesitating. "Lan Zhan wasn't all the way wrong. This stuff can be dangerous for you."

"Can you control it or can't you?" he demands, and he isn't playing fair, but he doesn't care. "As long as it's you what do I have to worry about?"

“Nothing,” Wei Wuxian answers, almost before he’s finished speaking. He stands a little straighter and steps in front of Jiang Cheng, lifting his flute to his mouth.

If his stomach rolls a little as the night wears on, he keeps it to himself.

Compared to what his brother endured for those three months in the Burial Mounds, this is nothing. Compared to everything his family has suffered now and had suffered in the future he won’t let come to pass -

Compared to that, this is mercy.

~

It’s dawn by the time Wei Wuxian finishes. They leave Wen Chao’s corpse cooling in pieces. He’s tired, of course, but Wei Wuxian looks exhausted, looks small in the morning light with the flute tucked back into his sash. He’s talking about walking back to Lotus Pier, and Jiang Cheng had been okay with that last time, but last time they hadn’t spent hours torturing someone.

“No,” he says, and Wei Wuxian gets a stubborn set to his mouth that Jiang Cheng ignores. It turns out that Jin Ling got that look from Wei Wuxian, because he knows neither he nor A-jie look like that. He’d been ascribing it to Jin Zixuan, but he sees now that that was a mistake. “You look like shit, we’re not walking back home. I don’t even trust you to take your sword, honestly.” He unsheathes Sandu and steps onto the hilt, holding out his hand for Wei Wuxian. “Come on, at least this way I can make sure you don’t take a wrong turn and get lost for another three months.”

“I’m not a kid,” he mutters, but his shoulders have loosened. “Maybe I want to walk through Yunmeng again after so long away.”

He rolls his eyes. “Maybe I don’t give a shit. Come here.”

Wei Wuxian’s lips quirk up in an almost smile. He’s still a brat though. He jumps up onto the sword instead of just taking his hand like a normal person. Jiang Cheng huffs out an irritated breath, but just reaches out to grab his brother around the waist. The last thing he needs is the idiot falling off.

The flight to Lotus Pier is relatively quick, which is probably for the best, since a couple times he’s almost certain that Wei Wuxian has fallen asleep standing up. Lotus Pier is still under construction, but the first thing he’d fixed had been their home, which was probably selfish of him, but he doesn’t care. He couldn’t stand seeing it as the Wens had left it.

“Come on, your room is in the same place,” he says, tugging on Wei Wuxian’s arm like he really is a little kid.

He shakes his head. “Shouldn’t I – I should pay my respects. To Uncle Jiang and Madame Yu.”

“You should go to bed,” he says firmly. “You’ve had a long night. They’re not going anywhere.” Wei Wuxian swallows and looks away. Jiang Cheng tries to ignore the stab of guilt in his chest. For him it’s been twenty years since his parents died, but for Wei Wuxian it’s been only months, and it’s not like he really would have had any time to process or mourn while in the Burial Mounds. He grabs Wei Wuxian’s arm and yanks him towards the family shrine. “Fine, but then you’re going straight to bed, understand?”

“You’ve gotten bossier while I was away,” he says, and for a moment Jiang Cheng worries if he’s doing this all wrong, if he should try and be soft like A-jie, which would be a disaster because he literally has no idea how to do that and also probably everyone would think he’s possessed.

But when he looks back, Wei Wuxian is smiling at him, so he only rolls his eyes. “It comes with the territory of being Sect Leader. Some people in this family actually do as I say, it’s a novel experience.”

Wei Wuxian keeps smiling until they get to the shrine, and then he’s back to looking small and exhausted. The sooner they get this over with, the better. Jiang Cheng lights the incense and kneels next to his brother, bowing with him to his parents.

He doesn’t know if Wei Wuxian is too tired to keep his voice as low as he intends to, or if it’s because Jiang Cheng is paying more attention to his brother than he did last time, but he hears him mumble just like before, except this time he can understand it. “You asked me to keep Jiang Cheng and Shijie safe. I did it. You can rest now.”

His whole body goes cold and his mind snaps back to that day so long ago, to holding Wei Wuxian’s hand tightly in his own and begging his parents not to send them away. He tries to imagine saying the same thing to Lan Yuan, his pseudo nephew who he’s only met a few times, as his parents said to Wei Wuxian that day, and it makes bile rise in the back of his throat. He hasn’t thought of it much since. There’d been a lot going on, and he hadn’t taken it to heart.

Wei Wuxian clearly did.

He shouldn’t say anything. Wei Wuxian obviously hadn’t meant for him to hear that.

Fuck it.

“I hate that Dad said that to you,” he says. Wei Wuxian startles, looking at him with wide, fearful eyes, but even that’s not enough to make him keep his mouth shut. “It was one thing for Mom, who’d always been awful to you, to say something like that, but I can’t believe Dad did that. What was he thinking? He should have told me and A-jie to take care of you too.”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. “No! I – Jiang Cheng, they’re right here! Of course they told me to protect you, don’t be stupid!”

He only raises an eyebrow before turning to his parent’s tablets and bowing once more. “Mother. Father. I love you. I honor you. I miss you. But your last words to Wei Wuxian were cruel and I’ll never forgive you for them.”

“Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian roars, eyes narrowed in anger. His scandalized glare would be funny under other circumstances. “Apologize to them!”

He shrugs, unrepentant. “They should have told me and A-jie to take care of you too. You’re not our bodyguard, you’re our brother. A-jie was right. We have to take care of each other.” Seeing Wei Wuxian with that vulnerable look in his face makes him feel itchy all over. “Starting with getting some proper sleep.”

He goes to stand up, but Wei Wuxian grabs his arm and yanks him back down. He has to shove down the urge to just wrap his brother in Zidian and toss him into bed. “Hey, I’m serious! Apologize to you parents!”

“I won’t,” he says. “I know I’m a coward for not saying anything to them when they were still alive, but that doesn’t mean I’ll forgive them for saying those things to you.” He’s spent too much time wondering about what he could have done to help Wei Wuxian after he got back from the Burial Mounds and probably not enough time wondering about what he could have done all the years before that, when his mother had been so cruel to Wei Wuxian and his father – well, he’d thought that Wei Wuxian was his father’s favorite, the son he’d wanted that Jiang Cheng could never be, but then he’d said those horrible things to Wei Wuxian, and he doesn’t know anymore.

“You’re not a coward!” Wei Wuxian shouts, which surely isn’t appropriate behavior in their ancestral shrine, but since Jiang Cheng isn’t looking to make this situation worse, so he doesn’t point it out. “Who called you a coward? I’ll beat them up! No one talks about Jiang Cheng like that!”

It’s so close to something he would have said before everything that Jiang Cheng can’t help but smile. It’s clearly the wrong thing to do, Wei Wuxian getting even more upset. He reaches for his flute and Jiang Cheng’s certain he doesn’t even realize he’s doing it. He grabs his brother’s wrist. “Hey, calm down. No one called me a coward. I’m just saying I should have stood up for you more.”

Wei Wuxian’s shaking his head, but he doesn’t pull his arm away, so there’s that at least. “I don’t want you fighting with your parents. I never did.”

That was part of the problem. Maybe if he’d managed to stand up to his mother none of this would have happened. Maybe if had, his mother wouldn’t have felt that she could whip his brother half to death and Wei Wuxian would have been able to stop that flare from going off.

But he’ll never know, and that line of thought isn’t fair to himself anyway. He’d been almost as scared of his mother as Wei Wuxian had been, and the few times he’d tried to stand up for himself his mother had smacked him back down, never mind him trying to defend the boy she’d hated. Regardless, that’s not something he can change, and this is. Being this honest about his emotions is going to leave him covered with hives or something later, but *not* talking about his feelings hasn’t exactly done him any favors in life.

“I know,” he says, “but it’s not about what you want, shockingly. It’s about what I should have done as your brother.” Wei Wuxian is shaking his head again, but Jiang Cheng doesn’t have the energy to continue arguing with him about it. He hadn’t spent the night using

demonic cultivation, but he still hasn't slept, and he's exhausted. He uses his grip on Wei Wuxian's wrist to pull him to his feet. "It's time to get some sleep. I'll order you as your sect leader if I have to. I can do that now, you know."

Wei Wuxian has that look on his face, and he's not going to let this go, of course. "If you don't tell your parents you're sorry-"

"I can respect my parents and not agree with them," he says, tugging Wei Wuxian out of the shrine. He lets him, so there's that. "If you really want to change my mind, you'll have better luck after some sleep. You look half dead, I can't take you seriously like this."

Wei Wuxian rolls his eyes, but doesn't fight him anymore as he marches him to his room. He pushes Wei Wuxian through the door, in his rebuilt room with as much of his old things as they could salvage and new replacements for everything else, and there's a moment where Wei Wuxian looks around and smiles, both too small and too soft to be anything but genuine, before he starts pulling off his robes.

Jiang Cheng has delivered his brother to his room, he should go to his own and go to bed, but he's hesitating. The first time around he'd slept like shit the first night Wei Wuxian was back at Lotus Pier. He'd kept having dreams that he'd woken up to find Wei Wuxian gone, and it had taken several long minutes each time for the bitter misery to lift from his chest, to remember his brother was just down the hall. Wei Wuxian didn't leave last time, and there's no reason to think he'll do so this time, but he still asks, "You're going to be here in the morning, right?"

Wei Wuxian pauses, looking up as if he's just realized Jiang Cheng is still in the doorway watching him. "Yeah. I'll be here."

"Just because I told Lan Wangji that we'd see him at Qinghe," he says, because he has some pride, he's not a little kid. "And A-jie is there too, and you have no idea how – well, she's going to want to see you, is all."

"Jiang Cheng," he says, not exactly warm but with a softness around his eyes. "I'll be here in the morning. I promise."

Wei Wuxian has only ever broken one promise, and while it was a pretty big one, Jiang Cheng is inclined to believe him anyway. He's always inclined to believe him, had been up until Jin Guangyao had manipulated him into thinking Wei Wuxian had been responsible for their sister's death.

"Okay," he says. He still doesn't leave. He doesn't know why. Wei Wuxian's eyebrows dip together in concern and Jiang Cheng shakes his head and says, "Sleep well, Wei Wuxian."

"Sleep well," his brother echoes, and Jiang Cheng forces himself not to turn around and check that he's still there. Obviously he's still there.

It's not until he's in his own room that he realizes Suibian is still shoved into his belt. He almost goes back to leave it in Wei Wuxian's room, but instead he just leans it against the

wall. It's not like Wei Wuxian can use it anyway, and maybe this way he can take on some of the responsibility when people question his brother about not carrying his sword.

Even with the assurance that Wei Wuxian is going to be there when he wakes up and the tiredness he can feel down to his bones, it still takes him a long time to fall asleep.

He misses Jin Ling. He hopes that he doesn't fuck this up so badly that his nephew is never born. He hopes he doesn't make all this even worse than last time. It's not like he has a great track record in that area.

He misses Wei Wuxian, even though he's just down the hall, even though he's closer than he's been in a long time.

Wei Wuxian would know what to do, would have all the answers to fix this, because he always does. Even though Jiang Cheng knows better, it doesn't stop it from feeling true

No matter the time or place, Jiang Cheng can't shake the idea that his older brother can fix anything, and it's a feeling that doesn't do him any good.

This time, after all, he's going to be the one to fix things.

Hopefully.

## Chapter End Notes

total chapter count is approximate and subject to change

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## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jiang Cheng will find an excuse to hug his sister and probably cry on her a bit later, because she's alive, right there in front of him, and it's enough to make him giddy. But for now he hangs back, staying a few steps behind as Wei Wuxian tentatively walks forward, his shoulders tight with tension. He rolls his eyes only because Wei Wuxian can't see him. As if A-jie could ever be really mad at him. She loves him too much, and unlike Jiang Cheng, she's so good at loving, she does it unflinchingly and honestly, no matter how hard or complicated it gets. He has no idea who she learned it from. Certainly not their parents.

"Shijie," Wei Wuxian says quietly. A-jie freezes, and she slowly, carefully looks up, hesitant in a way that makes him ache. How many times had she overheard someone laughing or talking and thought for a single, irrational moment that it was their brother, only to be disappointed? Too many times, probably. When you're looking for someone, you'll see them everywhere.

How many times had he been convinced he'd heard Wei Wuxian's voice, seen him walking in the street, smelled him in an empty room? Each time he'd been wrong, of course, and his brother had still been dead, but there's always a split second where the hope is crushing.

A-jie stands and walks to Wei Wuxian, her eyes welling up with tears as she reaches out for him. "A-Xian?"

Wei Wuxian looks down, as if awaiting a scolding, bracing himself for their sister's anger, because he's an idiot. A-jie is the opposite of Jiang Cheng, after all. She gives her anger slowly and only to those she considers outsiders. For her family, she has no room for it. Which has its downsides too. Some of Jiang Cheng's most painful memories are of A-jie smiling as their mother yelled at her, and at least some things would have been easier if A-jie had given Jin Zixuan a good tongue lashing.

A-jie reaches forward, grasping Wei Wuxian's forearm with both hands. He looks up at that, at her smiling face, and his shoulders finally drop. She looks around, noticing all the eyes on them, and says, "Come on," not letting go of Wei Wuxian's arm as she walks towards their rooms. She finally catches sight of Jiang Cheng and her smile is so brilliant that he smiles back automatically, he can't help it, and follows them as she walks past. He'd thought that maybe he'd be able to keep from crying this time around, considering he's already lived through it once, but he's wrong, even if he's not crying for exactly the same reasons.

He'd been so *proud* to deliver Wei Wuxian to A-jie then, at being able to bring what was left of their family back together again. He'd thought that, even though they were in the midst of war, even though they could die tomorrow, even though Wei Wuxian was clearly not as he'd once been, that everything was going to be okay. He had his big sister and his big brother, and between them they'd always managed to figure out everything, so how could things not be okay?

Fuck, he'd been a naïve little brat.

He watches Wei Wuxian's face as A-jie asks him where he's been. It's the same as last time, trapped and scared, and just like before he doesn't really answer, not wanting to lie to her if he can help it. When he promises not to leave them again, Jiang Cheng can't even find any anger or indignation to tamp down.

He'd meant it when he said it, after all. Even his brother probably hadn't realized just then how gloriously fucked up everything was going to become.

Jiang Cheng rubs at his eyes, and really this is far too many tears, more than he'd shed last time, it's just embarrassing. "A-Cheng," A-jie says, and he lowers his arm to see his siblings looking at him, both of them with that same concerned little dip between their eyebrows, which great, is not at all what he'd wanted. She reaches out to squeeze his arm. "It's okay. You brought him home."

"I mostly just stumbled onto him," he admits, but smiles. "But I do try and do as my elder sister tells me, A-jie."

She laughs at that, and she must realize that Wei Wuxian doesn't have the context for what they're saying, because she turns to him and says, "I told A-Cheng to bring you home. Even with everyone saying," she cuts herself off and her smile because a little forced, "just, that no matter what, he had to find you and bring you home."

Even if it was just a body for them to lay to rest next to their parents. It didn't matter if Wei Wuxian was already dead, he had to find their brother, he had to bring him home.

Wei Wuxian knows he's missing something, but he doesn't ask, just looking between them with a startled, vulnerable look that Jiang Cheng hates. Wei Wuxian reaches out, but it's not to A-jie this time. He leans over to wipe the tears from Jiang Cheng's cheeks, and for a moment he's right back in that temple, screaming at Wei Wuxian for giving him his golden core, screaming for all the ways he'd failed and all that he'd lost. His brother is looking at him with that exact same look now as he had then, which means he'd loved Jiang Cheng in exactly the same way and just as much then, after sixteen years dead and everything that had passed between them, as he does right now, when the worst of everything between them hasn't happened yet.

It's an effort to not start crying all over again, to force a smile and hope it doesn't look too broken.

Whether Jiang Cheng manages to fix things or not, Wei Wuxian isn't blameless for everything that happened. But his brother has always loved him, and Jiang Cheng shouldn't have doubted that.

"Wei Wuxian! Wei Wuxian!"

They all wipe their faces and sit a little straighter at Nie Huaisang's voice, and its strange to hear him this young, this openly excited and happy. Once his brother died, Nie Huaisang



hadn't every really seemed happy about anything, but it's not like Jiang Cheng of all people is going to hold that against him.

He comes rushing in, face bright. "It's you, it's really you, everyone was talking about it, I knew you'd come back!" Nie Huaisang reaches for him and Wei Wuxian flinches away. Nie Huaisang freezes, waiting even as his whole face softens into concern, and Jiang Cheng wonders how much he's figured out just from that alone. Nie Huaisang was never an idiot, they just weren't paying attention.

Well, Wei Wuxian had been, of course. According to Nie Huaisang, he hadn't been that surprised to find him at the center of everything.

"Nie Huaisang," Wei Wuxian says, grabbing his raised arm and lowering it, forcing a smile that still seems truly happy for all that he's trying to cover up the awkwardness. "It's good to see you again."

He smiles, easily following Wei Wuxian's lead. "I'm so glad you're back, everyone's been so worried for you and looking for you! Especially Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji, they almost started a whole other war about you!"

Jiang Cheng hadn't let Nie Huaisang finish speaking last time, too embarrassed and worried about how his brother would react, but this time he just groans and hides his face behind his sleeve. Nie Huaisang is smart. If this is the first thing he's telling Wei Wuxian after seeing him flinch, then Jiang Cheng thinks there might be a good reason for it.

"Another war?" Wei Wuxian asks, glancing at Jiang Cheng who's peeking at him from behind his sleeve. "Why?"

Nie Huaisang waves his fan. "Oh well, Sect Leaders Jin and Lan thought it was a waste of time to go looking for you, and that people as powerful as Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji shouldn't be spared from the battlefield to go on personal missions. They got into some pretty big fights about it, but at the end of the day Jiang Cheng is a sect leader and Lan Wangji always managed to be missing whenever his uncle was looking for him, so." He pauses, looking to the side and a little uncomfortable as he says, "My brother thought the same, but don't take it personally, Wei Wuxian! It's just," he shrugs, "the war, and well, most people thought that you were dead. But he's really happy you're alive! We're going to throw a banquet tonight to celebrate your return!"

Jiang Cheng can't imagine Nie Mingjue being really happy about anything.

Wei Wuxian blinks, looking a little lost as he says, "Oh. I – you don't have to do that, I'm sure people have better things to do—"

"Nonsense!" Nie Huaisang declares with an impervious flick of his fan. "It's a war, Wei Wuxian, people need an excuse to celebrate or they'll go mad."

There's a creak of the floorboard and they all turn. Lan Wangji is standing in the doorway, eyes flickering over them then landing on Wei Wuxian and staying there for a beat too long before looking away. "I apologize. I didn't mean to interrupt."

He starts to back away, but A-jie gets to her feet. “Hanguang Jun, please stay! We were just talking about you.”

Lan Wangji pauses, looking like he’d rather continue retreating, but doing so would be rude. Jiang Cheng knows that Lan Wangji has no problem being rude when the occasion calls for it, but he also knows that being rude to A-jie isn’t something he’d do casually.

A-jie lifts her hands in front of her and goes into a deep, formal bow, something she has no need to do to Lan Wangji since they’re equals. Well, technically A-jie outranks him slightly even if she’s not a fighter, as she’s the sister to a sect leader rather than the nephew of one, but it gets a little muddled since Lan Wangji will very likely end up acting as the Lan Sect Leader at some point, and A-jie isn’t expected to play that same role within the Jiang Sect.

Regardless, she has no need to bow to him as she is now, as if she’s a servant or commoner. Nie Huaisang’s eyebrows shoot up before he hides his face behind his fan and Wei Wuxian has already half risen to his feet before Jiang Cheng pulls him back down.

“Jiang Yanli!” Lan Wangji is deeply uncomfortable. It’s more emotion than Jiang Cheng’s seen him express towards anyone except Wei Wuxian. He hurries to return the bow, to at least put them on an equal ground again, but A-jie reaches out to stop him, her hands gently pressing him back up again.

Lan Wangji glances nervously back at them, but Jiang Cheng only raises an eyebrow. If this had happened the first time around, he probably would have thrown a fit about it as soon as A-jie had started to lower herself, but he’s older now. A-jie knows what she’s doing, and it’s hardly as if Lan Wangji is one to take advantage.

Well, take advantage of his brother, maybe.

“Thank you,” she says sincerely. “The Jiang Clan owes you a great debt for helping to return Wei Wuxian to us.”

“I didn’t do anything,” he says, and the only reason Jiang Cheng picks up the note of bitterness is because he’s listening for it. “Lady Jiang, your gratitude is misplaced.”

“It is not,” she says firmly. “You’ve spent three months searching for him. It has been a great comfort to me, to know that you were out there looking for my brother, that you were doing what I could not. Thank you. From me personally, and from the Jiang Clan as a whole. He is precious to us.”

Jiang Cheng can’t remember A-jie ever speaking on behalf of the clan before, not that he has a problem with it. Well, except for that time in the forest when Madame Jin had insinuated some less than pleasant things about Wei Wuxian and his feelings toward A-jie, and in hindsight it’s probably a good thing he hadn’t been there for that whole fiasco, if only because he wouldn’t have been nearly as restrained as A-jie had been.

Oh.

Wei Wuxian knows that A-jie loves him. She doesn't need to tell him that with words. The only time she speaks on behalf of the clan is to say that the clan loves him too, something she obviously knows Jiang Cheng wouldn't have a problem with her saying.

Maybe she should speak on behalf of the clan more often. Fuck knows he's terrible at it, and Wei Wuxian can be charming and subtle when he wants to be, but mostly he just uses those skills to cause even more chaos.

Lan Wangji lowers his gaze and inclines his head. "I wish I could have done more."

A-jie just smiles and gestures him forward to her vacant seat, next to Wei Wuxian. Jiang Cheng bites down a grin at the look on his brother's face, which is pleased and confused and a little bit incredulous. "Please, stay. I was about to go prepare some food. Won't you share a meal with us, Hanguang Jun?"

When she smiles just so, bright and expectant and just a little bit hopeful, neither Jiang Cheng nor Wei Wuxian have ever been able to deny her anything. It speaks well of Lan Wangji that he can't seem to manage it either, sitting in the seat A-jie had left with Wei Wuxian almost improperly close and just a bit confused to how he ended up there. He and Wei Wuxian look at each other then look away, although Lan Wangji looks back almost immediately and as soon as he looks away Wei Wuxian is glancing back at him. It's ridiculous.

Jiang Cheng looks at Nie Huaisang, because there's nowhere else to look, and his eyes crinkle in the corners in the way that means he's smirking behind the fan, and Jiang Cheng has to turn his face away before he bursts out laughing.

He'd forgotten that he and Nie Huaisang used to have this. He'd been more Wei Wuxian's friend than his, but he'd been his friend all the same. They'd lost that during the war and the fallout of the Nightless City. They'd all lost each other during the war, in one way or another, but maybe this time they won't have to.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji says, breaking the silence. "Are you well?"

Wei Wuxian smiles and waves a hand. "Of course, of course, why wouldn't I be?" Lan Wangji glances at his flute then opens his mouth, as if he's more than happy to answer that question, and Wei Wuxian reaches out to cover the bottom of his face with his hand. "I'm fine, I'm fine! Aren't I fine, Jiang Cheng?"

"No more mentally unstable than normal," he says, which is actually a huge lie, but lying for his older brother has been his job practically his whole life so he doesn't even feel bad about it. "You might soon be missing a hand if you don't remove it from Lan Wangji, though."

He regrets saying that as soon as it's out of his mouth. It makes him think of the Wens at Lotus Pier, of Wei Wuxian lying there, not fighting back against Madame Yu because he never did, just waiting for her to cut off his hand, willing to let her cut off his hand.

It makes him kind of sick, actually. It's been twenty years and he doesn't think he'll ever get that memory out his mind. Not just Lotus Pier being destroyed and his parents dying, but before that, thinking that he was going to be forced to watch his mother kill his brother.

Before the issue of him losing a hand had even come up, Jiang Cheng had felt certain that his mother wasn't going to stop whipping Wei Wuxian until he was dead.

If Wei Wuxian is thinking along the same lines he is, he doesn't show it, instead his eyes widen as he snatches his hand back. "Ah, sorry, Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji's hand twitches, like perhaps he was thinking of raising it to touch his lips, and he says, "It's fine."

Fuck, he can't stand this. Maybe he preferred it when they were fighting.

Luckily for his sanity, A-jie comes back then, bringing rice and sizzling meat from the kitchen.

Lan Wangji tries to help her serve the food, but Wei Wuxian only laughs and pushes Lan Wangji's hands into his lap, scolding him about getting in A-jie's way. Lan Wangji looks genuinely worried about having caused offense for a moment before A-jie smiles at him and piles food onto his plate.

Wei Wuxian makes a big production out of taking a too big bite of rice, which does nothing to distract Jiang Cheng from how he tears the meat up, gesticulates with it, mixes it with bits of rice, but doesn't actually eat any of it.

Jiang Cheng is certain everyone at the table notices.

None of them say anything about it.

~

Wei Wuxian is supposed to resting before the banquet, but Jiang Cheng kind of doubts that's what he's doing. But he's in his room and not causing any trouble, which is about as much as he can hope for.

He stands in the courtyard outside their rooms, looking up at the bright sky, trying to think of what on earth he's supposed to do now. Nothing really requires his attention right at this moment, but there are dozens of things he could go stick his nose in, yet somehow both doing nothing and doing something seem equally unappealing. Maybe he'll stand here, just like this, watching the clouds pass until they have to go to that banquet.

He can't let things play out like they did last time. That was the beginning of the rumors, of the distrust, and if he can't stop other clans from spreading hateful rumors about his brother, he can at least make it clear that it's not something he's going to tolerate.

"A-Cheng?"

He looks down and A-jie is in front of him. He hadn't even noticed her walking up. "Hey."

She presses her lips together, then says, "Follow me," and walks to her room. The Jiang Sect was given a whole wing of rooms within the Nie grounds, but his, A-jie's, and Wei Wuxian's are slightly apart from everyone else's, and it has its own sitting room, even while his

disciples are packed three or four to a room. He steps inside, not sure what he's expecting to when A-jie slides the door shut but doesn't turn around to look at him. "What happened to A-Xian?"

Fuck.

Part of the reason he and Wei Wuxian don't like to lie to A-jie is because she's A-jie, but a larger, much more practical reason is that they're shit at it. "He hasn't said."

She turns to face him, folding her hands into her sleeves and frowning.

"He doesn't want you to know," he says. "He hasn't told me, and even I don't know exactly." He knows some of it, but not all of it. He doesn't think anyone has ever known all of it, not even Lan Wangji.

This hadn't been an issue last time because he hadn't known anything. A-jie hadn't asked before, which means she's noticed something this time not only in Wei Wuxian but in him too, something that has clued her into the fact that he knows more than she does.

"Tell me," she says. He clenches his hands into fists and has to consciously force them to relax. "A-Cheng."

He starts pacing, partially because he feels he has to move, and partially so he doesn't have to look at her while he talks. "We heard rumors, right before we found him. The Wens we'd interrogated said that three months ago they'd captured him and dropped him in the Burial Mounds. Which can't be true, because no one could survive that, no one who enters the Burial Mounds ever comes out again."

"You think it's true," she says, and she still sounds steady. A-jie's always stronger than people think she is. "You think A-Xian spent three months in a place like that?"

"Yes," he says, "without his sword, and all alone. He developed a way to make it out of there, but – A-jie, it's not, that place," he stops, because A-jie was taught about the Burial Mounds the same as he was. There's nothing that he could reasonably know in this timeline that she doesn't also know, so there's no point in saying anything at all.

She nods, eyes distant, until she lets out a sharp gasp and presses her hands to her mouth. She's gone a deathly shade of pale, and Jiang Cheng reaches for her, worried that she's going to faint. He doesn't understand, unless this is some sort of delayed reaction, but that doesn't make any sense. "A-Cheng. What did he eat?"

"What did he eat?" he repeats incredulously. He knows that one of the ways A-jie shows her love is through food, but considering what he's just told her this seems like a strange thing to get stuck on. "I don't know. Does it matter?" He'd seen fruit trees when he'd gone there, but only in the one part of the Burial Mounds that Wei Wuxian and the Wens had been, so he's not sure if that's something they did or maybe something Wei Wuxian had done during his first three months there, but either way it didn't seem to be naturally occurring.

"What did he eat?" she repeats, more forcefully this time. "What was there for him to eat?"

“Bark?” he offers, even though he knows that’s ridiculous. “I don’t know. I didn’t think there was anything there but bodies.”

A-jie just looks at him.

Now she’s the one gripping his arms to keep him steady. “No,” he says, even as several things both from this time and last time slide into place, why Wei Wuxian hadn’t eaten the meat today and other things too. It makes sense. What was it that Wei Wuxian had said to him when he’d asked if the Wens could live on the stuff they were trying to grow? Something about people eating anything if they’re hungry enough, with a type of gravity and grimness that Jiang Cheng hadn’t had the energy to question him on at the time, not with everything else going on. He wishes he had. He wishes a lot of things. “He wouldn’t.”

“He has to eat, A-Cheng,” she says quietly. “He was still recovering from Mother using Zidian on him. He’d been captured and probably tortured before they even threw him into the Burial Mounds. If he hadn’t eaten, and eaten quickly, he would have died. He had to eat, and he had to eat what was available.”

He’d also just lost his golden core. It’s a miracle Wei Wuxian was even alive enough for the Wens to torture and try to kill. “We can’t tell anyone.”

If anyone finds out that Wei Wuxian possibly ate the rotting flesh of dead cultivators to stay alive in the Burial Mounds, there will nothing Jiang Cheng can do save his brother’s reputation. It won’t matter that he did it to stay alive. It won’t matter that those very same corpses were likely trying to kill him. They’ll label him a monster and be done with it.

Jiang Cheng can feel his lunch squirming in his stomach just as the thought of it, but mostly he just wants to hide his brother away so nothing else bad can happen to him, to keep him away from all the sects that will surely make everything worse. But even if he could, he can’t. Nie Huaisang was right. Without Wei Wuxian, without his demonic cultivation, the Wens would have won the war.

But that doesn’t mean he’s willing to sacrifice his brother for that victory. Not like this, not like it had happened last time. It would have been one thing if Wei Wuxian had died fighting the Wens, it would be devastating, but this is a war after all. But what had actually happened, the rumors and clans gossiping and consuming him until he was whittled away into a different shape, until they’d consumed the person his brother had used to be, well, that’s something he can’t stand, not again. Wei Wuxian had made decisions that had devastating consequences for all of them. But those choices had been severely limited by public opinion and circumstance, and if Jiang Cheng wishes that Wei Wuxian had made different choices, he can at least understand why he didn’t.

The cultivation world ate his brother alive last time. Jiang Cheng isn’t going to give them another reason to do it again. He knows which form of cannibalism he finds more unforgiveable, but he also knows that no one else will agree with him.

A-jie nods, no hesitation, then, “What are we going to do?”

He opens his mouth, hoping something intelligent and useful will come out, but nothing does. He's been through so much, has been a Sect Leader for decades, but even after all this time, he still doesn't know how to help Wei Wuxian, he still doesn't know how to keep his family from breaking apart.

"Oh, A-Cheng," she says, and she pulls him into a hug, and he reacts greedily, pressing his forehead into her shoulder and holding her probably too tightly, but she doesn't complain. His sister's been dead for years, but she's alive, here in his arms. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to put this all on you. We'll figure it out together."

"I'm Sect Leader," he mumbles.

"And you're doing wonderfully," she says, which Jiang Cheng knows is an overstatement, "but you're also my little brother. A-Xian is home. That's the important part. We'll figure out the rest."

A-jie's right at about that. He's pretty sure the secret to keeping everything from going to shit is to keep Wei Wuxian home and out of the Burial Mounds.

"Okay," he says.

He's not doing this alone. He's not the only person who cares for Wei Wuxian. He doesn't have to do this all on his own if only he can figure out ways to get Wei Wuxian to accept other people's help.

It sounds so simple, but considering his brother, he knows it won't be.

~

Jiang Cheng is nervous about the banquet, because how can he not be, but it's already going better than last time. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian aren't fighting this time around, so Lan Wangji is here, which means when Nie Mingjue toasts Wei Wuxian's safe return, he raises his glass with the rest of them. "Wei Wuxian," Nie Mingjue asks after setting down his glass, "why aren't you carrying your sword?"

Something that Jiang Cheng hadn't noticed last time was the lack of judgement with that question, how he didn't seem angry or insulted, just quietly curious. Knowing what he does now about the Nie Sect's relationship with their blades, he thinks it might even be concern that Wei Wuxian's sword has turned on him or harmed him in some way.

It makes him like Nie Mingjue a little more. Maybe the only reason they hadn't gotten along before was that they hadn't understood each other. Well, and Nie Mingjue thinking that Wei Wuxian was evil and holding it against Jiang Cheng that he didn't believe the same, but hopefully that won't be an issue this time around.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian touches his flute and looks away.

"It's at Lotus Pier," Jiang Cheng says calmly. "It's not necessary for him to carry it at this time."

There's a fission of unease in the room, and he sees Wei Wuxian turn to look at him, but he doesn't react to it. He's likely giving Nie Mingjue the impression that his concerns about Wei Wuxian's sword are correct, but it's probably better that he thinks that Wei Wuxian's sword has been overpowered by some vengeful spirit.

Sect Leader Yao, as insufferable as always, huffs and crosses his arms. "Wei Wuxian's reputation is well known, but carrying a sword is a mark of honor among cultivation clans. It's a sign of impertinence and disrespect that he carries no sword."

Jiang Cheng slaps his hand against the table, loud and abrupt, and the hall startles. He's been playing nice up until now after all, something he'd done until he'd figured out that always trying to keep the peace didn't help his clan like he thought it would. Besides, he's not as scared as uncertain as he was the last time around, he knows the value and power of his clan and how to use that to his advantage. Zidian sparks on his hand as he shouts, "I am his sect leader! If I allow it, who are you to declare it disrespectful? The only impertinent one here is you, for daring to insult both my siblings to my face."

A-jie doesn't carry a sword either. She has one, but her core is so weak that it doesn't do her any good to have it at her side. Everyone knows it, and no one would dare call her disrespectful for it, but it would still be extremely rude of anyone to say that, to say the difference between A-jie and Wei Wuxian is that she's weak and he's not. He's counting on that.

Sect Leader Yao opens his mouth, but Nie Huaisang interrupts, "Wei Wuxian, tell us about how you killed Wen Chao!"

Jiang Cheng and his brother look at each other then away. Wei Wuxian forces a smile and says, "I'm afraid it's not good dinner conversation."

While both of them feel like Wen Chao got exactly what he deserved, while they wouldn't do it any differently, they don't relish in suffering for the sake of causing suffering. That's not true of everyone sitting here right now.

"Oh," Nie Huaisang says, fidgeting with his fan.

Jin Zixun says, "Jiang Cheng, calm down. Why shouldn't Wei Wuxian carry a sword? I wanted to challenge him to a friendly match to test our skills, but I suppose I can't now."

He hates this kid.

"You should refer to me as Sect Leader Jiang," he says coldly. "I must congratulate you on the depth of improvement your skills must have undergone for you to believe they could match Wei Wuxian's."

Jin Zixun's hands clench into fists. "I suppose we'll never know, Sect Leader Jiang, as he doesn't carry a sword, and isn't that a shame?"

Isn't that *shameful*, he clearly means.



“My brother hardly needs a sword to stand against you,” he says, and this is about the last thing he’d been planning on doing, but fuck does Jin Zixun piss him off. “If you’re truly so desperate to demonstrate your abilities, since you find your demonstration of them on the battlefield to be inadequate, the Jiang Clan is willing to indulge you.”

“Maybe, uh, surely that’s not,” Nie Huaisang starts, but Nie Mingjue shakes his head and he stops talking.

Jiang Cheng turns to Wei Wuxian, who’s wide eyed with A-jie’s hand on his arm. He gives him a small shake of his head, and he doesn’t want to do this, obviously, but Jiang Cheng says, “Stand up, Wei Wuxian. Leave your flute.”

He pauses, some of the panic receding at that. Jiang Cheng isn’t stupid enough to tell him use demonic cultivation in front of the sect leaders and their representatives. It’s just the opposite, actually. So many rumors were about how his brother was a charlatan, about how he only had his wicked tricks on his side and nothing else, and maybe this will help with that, if they see Wei Wuxian fight without them. Granted, it won’t do anything for rumors of his arrogance, but those had been circulating long before the Burial Mounds.

Jin Zixun is already on his feet, sword in hand and a furious snarl curling his lips back.

Wei Wuxian stands slowly and takes his flute out his belt. Jiang Cheng had expected him to put it on his own table, but instead he places it on Jiang Cheng’s. “Talismans?”

“If you feel that you need them,” he answers. He’d rather he didn’t, since people had said things against those too, but he’s already put his brother at enough of a disadvantage.

He nods like he understands anyway, then stands in front of Jin Zixun, his hands folded neatly behind his back. A-jie’s face is carefully blank as she folds her hands in her lap and watches, and everyone else is completely silent. “Aren’t you going to attack me?” Jin Zixun demands.

“This is your fight,” Wei Wuxian answers. “Nie Mingjue has thoughtfully provided some excellent alcohol that I was enjoying before you felt the need to upset Jiang Cheng.”

Meaning, we were all having a nice time before you decided to be a brat. Which isn’t totally accurate, but it does make Jin Zixun’s face crease in rage before he unsheathes his sword and swings it at Wei Wuxian. A-jie looks away and Nie Huaisang has started to rise from his chair, but Jiang Cheng just takes a sip of his wine.

Wei Wuxian steps to the side and the blade passes by him harmlessly, then ducks when Jin Zixun swings it back towards him. He spins so he’s standing directly behind Jin Zixun, his hands still tucked behind his back. Jin Zixun turns, but Wei Wuxian turns with him, and there’s delicate snort of laughter which if Jiang Cheng didn’t know better he’d say came from Lan Wangji.

There’s a few more seconds of that, with Wei Wuxian easily mirroring Jin Zixun’s movements, until Jin Zixun lets out an undignified shout of rage and twirls his sword behind him to hit Wei Wuxian. Except if he doesn’t hit Wei Wuxian, he’ll end up cutting his own

back open with his sword. Wei Wuxian must realize the same thing, because he reaches out, grabbing Jin Zixun's wrist right before the blade touches him and bending it backwards.

There's sickening crunch as Jin Zixun screams and drops his sword. Wei Wuxian doesn't let go of his broken wrist, instead using it to tug him up and over his shoulder so he falls on his back, getting the wind knocked out of him. Wei Wuxian steps on his throat, his arms crossed, but his face isn't mocking anymore, instead it's blank, and he's looking at Jin Zixun but his eyes are unfocussed, like he's not really seeing him, like he's seeing something else.

Shit.

His brother just got out of the Burial Mounds, where he'd spent a significant portion of time fighting for his life without his sword or his flute, and it turns out that Jiang Cheng is an idiot in every timeline. Jin Zixun is choking, silently gasping for air as his unbroken hands uselessly tries to lift Wei Wuxian's foot from his throat.

He looks down to the flute and understands, suddenly, why his brother had given it to him.

"Wei Wuxian!" he barks, picking up the flute and tossing it to him. "That's enough."

He catches the flute on instinct, staring at it for confused moment before awareness seems to come back to him, as he realizes he's not fighting ferocious corpses alone and defenseless in the Burial Mounds, but is in the Nie Sect hall, that he has his flute and his demonic cultivation and not just his fists.

Wei Wuxian looks down at Jin Zixun, like he's surprised to find him minutes from death beneath his heel, and lets him up, taking several steps back. Jin Zixun rolls on his side and starts coughing violently. His brother looks around the hall, at everyone staring at him in surprise and awe, even jealousy. Jin Zixun is far from the best cultivator, but he's still good, and Wei Wuxian just defeated him like it was nothing.

He inclines his head at them then turns and walks out of the banquet hall. Jiang Cheng hopes he's the only one that notices his brother's hands are trembling.

Well, he really fucked that one up. He wants to go after him, but he can't, leaving the banquet would be just as much of a mistake now as it'd been last time. It just gives the other clans the opportunity to gossip about his brother without him there to stop them. But letting Wei Wuxian be alone right now seems like a spectacularly bad idea, and he's already had one of those tonight.

"A-jie," he says, and once she's looking at him, he jerks his head towards the door. If anyone can help Wei Wuxian, it'll be their sister.

Her face clears and she smiles. She stands, gives a shallow bow and murmurs, "Please excuse me," then goes after Wei Wuxian. One glance at Lan Wangji makes it clear he'd like to follow her, but he keeps his place. Considering before he hadn't even shown up, Jiang Cheng is sure it has less to do with wanting to act as a respectable representative of the Lan Sect and more with not wanting to intrude on Wei Wuxian speaking with his sister.

Everyone is looking at him now, and Jin Zixun has pushed himself to his knees, cradling his broken wrist to his chest and murder in his eyes, but no one is speaking.

“Nie Huaisang,” he says, pouring himself more wine, “I was there when Wen Chao died. We tortured him. It wasn’t to get information out of him. It wasn’t as leverage or to send a message to others. We did it because he hurt our family. We did it to make him suffer just an ounce of what he had made us suffer. We did it as revenge.” He cuts his eyes across them, at the people who look approving and eager, and says flatly, “It’s one of the most dishonorable things I’ve ever done.” Lan Wangji had disapproved of their actions both times around. He’d had his family hurt and his sect torn apart by the Wens too, but he was better than them. Lan Wangji hadn’t taken any satisfaction in revenge, not even in the end when he’d watch Jin Guangao die, the person responsible for hurting his brother and lover. “I’d do it again.”

I’d do it to you, he thinks but doesn’t say. He knocks back his drink, and Nie Mingjue breaks the heavy silence to say, “While it may not be honorable, Sect Leader Jiang, it is understandable. We all have family we’d do anything to protect and seek justice for.”

Nie Huaisang flushes and looks down. Jin Zixun unsteadily walks back to his seat, and no one moves to help him. He’d quite literally asked for it, after all, and been beaten by someone who hadn’t even used any cultivation techniques. How is that supposed to be something for them to sympathize with?

He’s now given Jin Zixun a legitimate reason to hate both him and his brother, but he can’t really bring himself to mind all that much. Jin Zixun has always been insufferable.

“A toast, then,” Jiang Cheng says, and raises his cup. “To family!”

“To family!” Everyone drains their cups, and if things aren’t exactly easy for the rest of the night, no one says anything about Wei Wuxian and conversations about the war start up again to cover all the silence.

Jin Zixun doesn’t say anything for the rest of the night, which is a miracle on its own.

The banquet ends, and most everyone is drunk and stumbling back to their rooms. “Lan Wangji,” he says, waiting until he has the other man’s attention to say, “Could you do me a favor and let Wei Wuxian know I’ll be along in a moment? I have to take care of something first.”

It’s true, but he doubts it will take long. What he’s really trying to do is give Lan Wangji an excuse to check in on Wei Wuxian, just in case he needs it.

He nods, and his face doesn’t change at all, but Jiang Cheng almost gets the impression that he’s smiling.

He waits until everyone else is gone, until it’s just him and the Nie brothers who are watching him warily. He goes into a shallow bow. “Thank you for hosting this banquet to honor my brother’s return. I apologize for,” he pauses, trying to think of a good way to phrase it, and comes up blank. Starting an argument? Encouraging a duel in the middle of the hall? Dismissing both his siblings from a banquet that was being thrown for the Jiang Clan?

“It’s all right, Jiang Cheng,” Nie Mingjue says, and he sounds like he means it. “Is everything well with your brother?”

He snorts and rubs a hand over his face. The answer to that is obviously no, and there’s no point in pretending otherwise. Even if Nie Mingjue hadn’t picked up on it, Nie Huaisang obviously has. “As well as can be expected. He did spend three months dealing with – who knows what, so.”

“He was attacked,” Nie Huaisang says. “Probably a lot. Without a lot of warning. Not just – not just hurt, but *surprised*, like he thought he was safe and he then wasn’t. Like he was hunted.”

Jiang Cheng looks at him in surprise, then says, “Yes.” He hurries to add, “I’d thought so.” He’s less surprised that Nie Huaisang has figured that out than he is at him saying it. He hates showing his hand like that, which probably means he’s really worried about Wei Wuxian. Or thinks that Jiang Cheng has no idea. “Asking him to fight Jin Zixun was a mistake.”

“It served it’s purpose,” Nie Mingjue says, a smirk curling around the corner of his mouth. “Although I’d caution you against alienating the Jin Clan.”

“Jin Zixun is an embarrassment,” he says frankly. “Most of the Jin Sect have more sense than that.” Not that their sect leader is anything but a disgrace, but this is hardly the time to bring that up. First they win the war, then he can start collecting allies to go against the Jin Clan.

The Nie Huaisang of his time had assured him that his brother would be an easy sell on that front.

“Wei Wuxian’s sword?” Nie Mingjue asks, but it’s still concerned rather than angry.

He shakes his head. “No. It’s – no. I’m trying not to push on the things I don’t have to.”

“And you don’t think his sword is one of those things?” he presses, but he’s genuinely asking.

“Do you really think he needs it?” he asks. “He didn’t use his swords against the Wens.”

He presses his lips together, his gaze going flat and disapproving. “So those rumors of his wicked tricks-”

“Are rumors,” he says firmly. “What he’s doing is different. New. I don’t understand it, honestly, but that part he’s handling well. His new cultivation method is a result of what he’s been through and the changes that took on him, not the other way around.”

That’s not exactly true. The demonic cultivation does take a toll on him, but it’s not to blame for his current state. That’s due to three months of being tortured and alone.

While there’s no way he’s going to let Lan Wangji take his brother back to Gusu Lan, he should probably see if there’s something that he can do. There has to be. Wei Wuxian still used demonic cultivation after he came back to life, was still using it when Jiang Cheng sent

himself to the past, so Lan Wangji must have figured out a way to reverse some of the ill effects of the technique.

Nie Mingjue nods slowly, not entirely convinced but not disbelieving either. "I'm sorry for what Wei Wuxian's endured."

That actually leaves him speechless for a moment. No one has said that to him before, and he doubts anyone's ever said it to Wei Wuxian either. "Thank you," he says, "and thank you both for tonight, truly."

They nod and bow to him, and he returns it before going in search of his brother.

For once Wei Wuxian is exactly where he's supposed to be, and Jiang Cheng hesitates in the doorway of his rooms. Lan Wangji and A-jie are sitting on either side of him, and he's smiling as A-jie tells a story about some sort of drama that had happened in the kitchens this morning. There's a mostly eaten bowl of A-jie's soup in front of him and something loosens in Jiang Cheng's chest, to see his brother smiling and to know he's eaten some proper food.

"Wei Wuxian," he says, stepping inside.

Conversation pauses, and he's not sure what the look on his face is, but Lan Wangji and A-jie both get to their feet. Wei Wuxian grabs for A-jie's sleeve, but she only smiles and pats his cheek. Lan Wangji offers A-jie his arm and they both walk out, closing the door behind them so it's just him and Wei Wuxian, who slides his knee up to his chest and rests his chin on it, looking forlornly into the distance.

He sighs and sits next to his brother. "I'm sorry I made you do that."

Wei Wuxian startles, looking over at him. "You're sorry?"

"It wasn't fair of me. I just didn't want them to say terrible things about you, and I thought this might make them stop," he explains.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head, turning the rest of his body towards him. "No – I, I should have just – I could have just disarmed him and sat back down, but I didn't, and then I left, and after you'd," he cuts himself off, and asks almost too quietly for him to hear, "Do you really not mind if I carry my sword?"

"I'd rather you did," he says, because that's the only answer he can give, when he's not supposed to know that Wei Wuxian *can't* wield his sword. "But I'm not going to force you, and if I'm not going to push the issue as your sect leader then no one else should either. Who do they think they are? They're so rude." He looks suspiciously behind him. "Was Lan Wangji being pushy about it? He's pretty rude too, sticking his nose in Jiang Sect business. That's your fault, you know, he cares about you so much that you've pushed Huangang Jun of all people to rudeness."

Wei Wuxian laughs, then rubs at his eyes as he shakes his head. "No, he didn't say anything. Well. Kind of. He wants to play for me."

Oh, good. “That might be a good idea,” he says. “I’ll talk to him about it. He should really be coming to me with this type of stuff, you know.”

“I’ll pass it along,” Wei Wuxian says, rolling his eyes, and Jiang Cheng can’t help but smile.

He hides it by leaning over to lift the lid off the pot. “Any soup left? Don’t tell me you ate it all!”

He would actually love it if he’d eaten the whole pot. His brother is so damn *skinny*. How is he supposed win them the war if a strong wind snaps him in half?

There’s about half a pot left and he pours himself a bowl, and then fills up Wei Wuxian’s bowl too. He sighs, but picks up his spoon, which probably means A-jie had managed to work in some sort of lecture about eating properly. “Jiang Cheng?”

“Hm?” He has to swallow a too large bite of lotus root. “What?”

Wei Wuxian is looking down into his bowl. “Thank you. For what you said.”

He leans over to elbow him in the side, but says, “Anytime,” and he means it.

If he could save his brother with words, then he would. He doesn’t think it’ll be that easy, but he’s not going to fail from lack of trying.

## Chapter End Notes

i'm not moving through things nearly as quickly as i thought i would. everyone just has a lot of feelings, okay!

i hope you liked it :)

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# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jiang Cheng steps out his room the next morning and nearly walks straight into Jin Zixuan, who must have gotten in even earlier this morning or sometime last night. He considers walking back inside. On one hand, his future brother-in-law is still alive, which is good, because A-jie loves him and he's one half of what's needed to give him Jin Ling. On the other hand, he'd never really liked him that much before he'd married A-jie, and that opinion certainly isn't improved before breakfast.

"I heard Wei Wuxian is back," he says, without greeting him or bowing or anything to give the impression he's a civilized human being. "I heard he broke Jin Zixun's wrist."

"Sorry you weren't here to see it?" he asks. Jin Zixuan's face tightens, because the Jin will defend their people to their last breath. It would be an admiral quality if it didn't mean that quite so many rotting seeds stayed in the fruit of their sect, spreading their rot to all around them. "You're lucky that's all he broke. Jin Zixun insulted my siblings, and he's the one that asked for a match. If my brother can defeat one of your honorable disciples without even using his sword, or talismans, or breaking a sweat, your clan has bigger problems to worry about."

His lips are pressed together into a thin, disapproving line. "It was an excessive use of force between allies."

"He swung his sword at his back to try and slice my brother in half. Wei Wuxian could have moved out of the way in time, but then Jin Zixun would have slung his own blade into his back." Jiang Cheng gives a slight, mocking bow. "You are most welcome for your cousin's unsevered spine."

He expects Jin Zixuan's anger, but instead he's just staring at him, considering. "You've changed, Sect Leader Jiang."

Shit.

"Have I?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," he says. "You used to hide all your sharp edges because you were worried about who they'd hurt. And about what people would think of them."

He's so taken aback that for a moment he he's speechless with it. Had he been that transparent? Or had Jin Zixuan been that observant? He's not sure which option is more discomfiting.

"Yes, well. Look what that got me." It's true in both timelines. "The spar happened in full view of a banquet hall full of people. There is nothing to twist or lie about. Your cousin acted

rudely and my brother put him in his place for me. He should know better than to address the sect leader of a major clan that way. Doubly so when that clan leader is me.” Sparks of lightning dance up his arm.

Jin Zixuan is smiling at him, which makes him feel itchy all over. Fuck, but he pisses him off. It’s too bad that A-jie loves him and he’s going to give Jiang Cheng his beloved brat of a nephew.

He bows, exactly as formal as an outside disciple should be to a clan leader. “I will of course take to heart the wisdom of such an experienced and impartial clan leader.”

Jiang Cheng feels a spark of genuine amusement that he viciously shoves down. No need to start getting fond of the asshole now. “Oh, fuck off,” he snarls as he stalks past him, knocking his shoulder into him.

He doesn’t linger to check, but he thinks Jin Zixuan might be laughing.

~

Lan Xichen arrives at nearly midday and Nie Mingjue calls a meeting immediately. Which would be fine, except everyone’s there, and Jiang Cheng is still running around looking for his useless excuse for a brother. He can’t remember if Wei Wuxian attended this meeting last time. He’d skipped so many of them, that they all blur together in his memory, times when Jiang Cheng felt uncertain and alone, having to make the sort of decisions he’d thought he wouldn’t have to make for decades and facing people who didn’t particularly like him, and all he’d wanted was his big brother at his side.

Well, Jiang Cheng isn’t that scared kid. Still. Wei Wuxian *should* be here for this.

“A-jie!” he shouts across the courtyard to where his sister is sitting and reading. She startles and looks up at him, head tilted to the side. “Zewe Jun is here, and the Red Blade Master called a meeting. Find our brother and get him there.” He can at least use formal names when he’s shouting across their host’s home.

A-jie nods and then makes a shooing gesture with her hands, far too dignified to yell at him across courtyard, and he grins at her before turning and heading back to the meeting.

Because the miracle of last night was too good to last, Jiang Cheng has barely stepped into the room when Jin Zixun opens his fat mouth. “Really? Isn’t it arrogant of Wei Wuxian to keep us waiting like this this? Of course, we are all grateful that he killed Wen Chao, but we have waited so long, and still he is not here! Does he truly consider himself so far above us?”

The air in the room shifts, everyone glancing at one another.

Jiang Cheng looks at Jin Zixuan, but all he gets back is a smooth, empty face. Ah yes, this is why he’d hated him.

“How’s your wrist?” Jiang Cheng asks Jin Zixun. He can see the splint keeping it in place. Even with spiritual energy it will take a few days to heal. He flushes and opens his mouth to



answer, but Jiang Cheng doesn't let him, turning away from him to address the Nie and Lan brothers. "I've sent my sister to go find Wei Wuxian. Thank you all for waiting, but we may begin. I'll fill him in on anything he misses."

"You don't even know where he is?" Jin Zixun presses, derisive and pitying in equal measure.

When he was younger, this type of basic manipulation worked on him. Now it's almost amusing. "Do you know where every Jin disciple is at all times?"

"I would know where my brother is," he returns, and the indulgent tone he uses to say brother, as if that's not exactly what Wei Wuxian is, makes Jiang Cheng want to cut out his tongue.

"Oh," he says, soft and deadly and just like his mother. "How strange. I'm certain that Jin Zixuan doesn't know where all his brothers are."

There's ripple around the room even as Jin Zixuan's face goes tight and uncomfortable. His father's womanizing reputation and all the bastards he's sired is a sore spot, a blight on a the Jin's shining, upright reputation. Jiang Cheng doesn't let himself feel sorry for him. If he hadn't wanted to become a target, he should have done something about his cousin. Jiang Cheng had warned him, after all.

"Why you – all in defense of Wei Wuxian, the son of—" Zidian is sparking up his arm but it's unnecessary. Jin Zixun's mouth seals itself shut, muffled sounds making their way out but no actual words.

They all turn towards Lan Wangji, who hasn't moved in the slightest and isn't looking at any of them. Lan Xichen raises an eyebrow. "Wangji."

Lan Wangji only blinks, as if his brother hasn't said anything at all. He couldn't get away with it if he'd cast that spell on anyone else, but he is the honorable Second Jade of Lan, and Jin Zixun is the only one here who's neither a sect leader nor the heir to a sect leader.

"Perhaps we can start the meeting?" Nie Huaisang says, peeking at them over the fans. He glances at his brother after, like he isn't sure he should have said anything at all, but Nie Mingjue only nods and gestures to the map.

Jin Zixun shoots angry glares at them all until the silencing spell runs out, but mercifully keeps from saying anything else that makes Jiang Cheng want to whip him. As they talk, memories are coming back. This had been an important meeting, the one where the four major clans had decided to make their last stand against the Wens.

Which means as the meeting is wrapping up, he's only a little bit surprised when the doors open and Wei Wuxian steps inside just as they're discussing the awful, destructive power of the Ying Iron.

This part, Jiang Cheng remembers. What he hadn't remembered is the smell of sulphur hanging around his brother, but then again he hadn't known what it meant the first time

around, not this early on.

“There are ways to counteract it’s affects. In a month, we won’t have to worry about the Ying Iron anymore,” Wei Wuxian announces, like that’s a reasonable thing to say.

The first time he’d been so horrified he’d only been able to stare, but this time he struggles to keep from rolling his eyes. He slaps Wei Wuxian upside the head, and almost smiles when he clutches his head as if Jiang Cheng has split it open, giving him a look of exaggerated betrayal that been a staple of their childhood. “You go missing, make me and A-jie run around looking for you, miss most of a very important meeting, and then show up just to say improbable things? Were you waiting outside of a good moment to jump in?”

His brother blinks at him, taken aback, but some of the sourness left by using demonic cultivation has receded. “Only for a few minutes. If I didn’t have anything to say I was just going to wait until it was over.”

Jiang Cheng smacks him in the back of the knees with Sandu and Wei Wuxian jumps away, effectively ruining the last of the intimidating, othering aura he’d entered with. He’d been so worried about seeming like a mature, responsible adult the first time around. But this time he knows they’re all kids, and it’s important none of them forget it. It’s important none of them forget that his brother is a *person*. “Don’t be so rude to our hosts! Do you even have a plan for your crazy proclamation?” He already knows he does, but everyone else doesn’t. Shit like this is why everyone was so eager to turn on his brother.

“Yes,” he says. “I always have a plan.”

He tries very hard not to look as skeptical as he feels, because that’s probably not good for his bother’s reputation either, but judging by how Nie Huaisang is hiding his whole face behind his fan, he’s not that successful.

“I have a plan,” Wei Wuxian says, seriously this time.

Jiang Cheng gives him a moment, then asks, “Are you going to tell us what it is?”

Wei Wuxian hesitates, then shakes his head.

He can already see Jin Zixun opening his mouth, and it’s not like anyone looks pleased with the answer. “Is it going to work? Do you swear on my life it’ll work?” He doesn’t ask Wei Wuxian to swear on his own life because he’s aware that his brother doesn’t value it all that much.

“I swear,” he says, still serious. He reaches up to his belt, like he’s about to put his hand on Suiban, but of course there’s nothing there.

He lowers his hand.

Jiang Cheng would hug him if they weren’t in front of so many people. How had anyone ever been afraid of his brother when he looks like this? He looks like Jin Ling does before he starts crying.

“Young Master Wei,” Lan Xichen says quietly, “why aren’t you carrying your sword?”

“He’s not using it right now,” Jiang Cheng says before his brother can do more than flinch.

Lan Xichen still looks uncertain, but when he turns to Lan Wangji he – well, Jiang Cheng doesn’t see his face shift at all, but something must happen because Lan Xichen’s shoulders relax and he says, “I see.”

“If that’s all,” Wei Wuxian says, giving a slight bow before backing out and leaving the room.

Jiang Cheng debates staying to make sure they don’t start talking shit about his brother, but this room is full of more allies than enemies, so he just sighs and says, exasperated, “Elder brothers are so troublesome,” before shrugging and hurrying after Wei Wuxian.

Nie Huaisang laughs and he thinks Lan Wangji might even smile. He barely hears Nie Mingjue demand, “What’s that supposed to mean?” before shutting the door behind him.

Wei Wuxian can walk pretty quickly on his skinny legs and he has to break into a very undignified run to catch up with him. “Wei Wuxian! What was that about?”

He pauses, blinking like he hadn’t expected Jiang Cheng to go after him, which is ridiculous, because he *always* went after him. Well, until he hadn’t. Couldn’t. Until he’d had responsibilities that kept him from trailing after his irritating big brother. “What about?”

He rolls his eyes, falling in step with him as they walk around the Unclean Realm. “You know. All of that. Where were you this morning? Did something happen?”

“I just went for a walk,” he says dismissively. “You handled it fine, you didn’t need me.”

That’s literally the stupidest thing Wei Wuxian has ever said, which is impressive considering the amount of idiotic things that are constantly falling out of his brother’s mouth.

He reaches out, grabbing onto his brother’s flute as he comes to a halt. Wei Wuxian’s eyes widen and he jerks it away, but Jiang Cheng keeps his grip, just stepping that much closer. He’s not trying to take Chenqing away, he’s just holding onto it, and Wei Wuxian’s panic ebbs as he realizes it, that Jiang Cheng isn’t trying to take it from him. “I needed you there. If you need to be somewhere else, I’ll,” he pauses, pressing his mouth together. He doesn’t want to guilt Wei Wuxian into coming to things with him, not when one of those meetings with sneering, inconsiderate nobles could be the thing that makes him snap, but he also doesn’t want to give his brother permission to leave him behind. “I want you there,” he says instead. “It’s easier when you’re there.”

“I never make anything easy,” he says, a teasing note in his voice, but his eyes are wide and surprised. “You know I’ll just cause problems if I’m there.”

Maybe it wasn’t just that Wei Wuxian had been dealing with the after effects of the war and the Burial Mounds and not having his golden core. Maybe he’d seen how everyone was filled with some mixture of fear and hatred and hadn’t want to make things more difficult with his presence.

Fuck that. The amount of problems caused by his presence is nothing compared to the ones caused by his absence.

“I want you there,” he repeats.

Wei Wuxian is the first to look away, but he gives a single nod, and Jiang Cheng lets go of his flute. It takes him a moment to pull his hand back, for them to continue walking.

The silence is comfortable, but Jiang Cheng isn't interested in letting it linger. “Are you going to tell me what's really bothering you, or shall I guess? Has Lan Wangji not complimented your eyes today? You two are even more embarrassing than you were at Cloud Recesses.”

“Jiang Cheng!” he shouts, face turning a hilarious shade of red.

He searches into something very basic about himself, almost forgotten, but deeply engrained. He reaches out, yanks on the end of Wei Wuxian's ponytail, then goes running.

There's a moment where nothing happens and he's worried he's just made a fool of himself, but then Wei Wuxian gives a disbelieving laugh and chases after him. It's a good thing he has a lot of practice moving in the formal, layered robes of a sect leader. Wei Wuxian is fast gaining ground, and it's not like he'd been able to outrun him before his brother had spent three months testing his speed against fierce corpses and all other manner of things trying to kill him.

Luckily, he's had a head start, and he sees his salvation up ahead.

“A-jie!” he shouts, and his sister turns to face him. He only has a moment to see her face creased in distress and worry before he's ducking behind her, grabbing her shoulders and spinning her around to face Wei Wuxian like when they were children.

He barely notices Lan Wangji standing there, too busy using their elder sister as a shield, but as soon as Wei Wuxian turns the corner, he stops short, mouth open before it pulls back into a smile. “Lan Zhan!”

“Wei Ying,” he returns. He doesn't sound angry, exactly, but he doesn't seem happy either.

He'd expected A-jie to join in on their game, because she always does, but she feels tense under his hands. He lets her go, stepping back to stand next to Wei Wuxian, who's frowning as he looks between them. “Shijie,” he says slowly, “did Lan Zhan do something to upset you?”

It seems unlikely that he would have, considering he's been nothing but deferential to her so far, but they're both clearly upset, and there's no one else around.

A-jie shakes her head, “No, A-Xian, of course not. I just asked him some questions about this morning.”

Wei Wuxian tenses next to him, his face going dark. “What did he say?”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji says softly, searching his face.

A-jie steps forward, grabbing onto his forearms. “A-Xian, please don’t be angry at us.”

Oh, that’s clever. Wei Wuxian can never be angry at A-jie, and by grouping herself in with Lan Wangji, she’s making it so Wei Wuxian can’t get mad at him either, not without implying he’s mad at her.

“I’m not angry,” he says, but pretty much everything about his posture and his tone says otherwise. Or, well, actually – he looks scared. Why does he look scared? Jiang Cheng looks around them, as if there’s some sort of explanation not tied to the group of people he’s standing with, but there’s nothing around them. His brother still looking at Lan Wangji when he asks A-jie, “Did he tell you about the Yiling Office?”

She shakes her head. It’s the truth, after all.

“I did,” Jiang Cheng says. Wei Wuxian turns to him, and the betrayal breaking across his face hurts to see, but he also doesn’t *understand* it, and he has to. He’s not going to be able to save his brother if he doesn’t understand him. “Or well, I filled her in, at least. She’d already read the reports about it.” He hadn’t bothered last time, but after telling her about the Burial Mounds it seemed like a silly thing to keep from her, that all those deaths were on their brother’s hands. After all, he needs people on his side, people who love Wei Wuxian and will fight for him. A-jie has always been that person, and she’ll be able to fight better with all the information he can give her.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head, trying to step away, but A-jie doesn’t let go of his arm. “A-Xian, it’s okay. It doesn’t bother me.”

“How can it not bother you?” he demands, and Jiang Cheng almost puts him in a headlock for snapping at their sister, but he’s pale and his voice is shaking. He’s pulling back against A-jie’s grip, but she’s not letting go, and he won’t make her.

Lan Wangji’s eyebrows dip together, and he meets Jiang Cheng’s eyes just long enough to incline his head carefully and step away. He can’t decide if he should be annoyed that Lan Wangji seems to only trust leaving Wei Wuxian to A-jie’s care or consider it good sense.

“This is war,” she says, unwavering, and as much as they’d wanted to protect A-jie from all the terrible things of the world, it was still a bit of a wasted effort when she spent her days assisting as a medic, “and they’re our enemies. You did what you had to do.”

“I didn’t have to do that,” he says. “I *wanted* to do that. They’re still people, and I did that to them anyway. I didn’t care.”

She softens, stepping even closer to Wei Wuxian. “Oh, A-Xian. You care so much. You’re not like them. It’s not the same.”

He looks away, swallows, but doesn’t say anything.

“What’s not the same?” he asks.

A-jie sighs. "I found A-Xian on a cliff. He was watching the Nie disciples move the Wen prisoners."

Ah. The Nie aren't as bad as Jin, but they're not a merciful people, and they're in the middle of a war. He knows Wei Wuxian is going to want to help the Wens. He knows he's going to have to figure out some sort of way to help Wei Wuxian help the Wens if he doesn't want this all to be for nothing. But now isn't the time for it. Trying to defend the Wens before the war is won will just paint a target on all their backs.

"They were whipping them," he says, voice tight, "for falling down."

Oh *fuck*.

He sees his realization mirrored in A-jie's face. He moves without thinking, getting close enough to press his hands to his brother's back, where he knows the scars of Madame Yu using Zidian on him are. Wei Wuxian flinches at the touch, but between him and A-jie there's nowhere for him to go. "You are not a monster for killing the Wens in Yiling," he says, and he barely recognizes his voice, furious and intent and so close to breaking. "You are not the same as soldiers whipping defenseless civilians. And those civilians are not *you*."

"If they deserve to be whipped, then maybe," he starts, and his eyes widen as his mouth snaps shut.

"They don't deserve to be whipped!" A-jie says. He's glad their sister is handling this, because he can feel tears on his cheeks and he just knows if he opens his mouth it's going to come out as a sob. "And neither did you. Mother never should have – I *hate* her for how she treated you and A-Cheng!"

A-jie gasps, letting go of Wei Wuxian only to cover her mouth with her hands.

Jiang Cheng has never heard A-jie say she hates anyone.

This is not a conversation they should have in the middle of the Unclean Realm where anyone can overhear them.

"Come on," he says, grabbing both of his siblings' hands and dragging them to their rooms. They have to take several turns to avoid being seen, but the last thing they need is rumors of the them all running around crying. He closes the door shut behind them, then turns around. A-jie and Wei Wuxian are both sitting on their knees and staring at the floor, on the edge of breaking for very different reasons. He sits next to them, and he doesn't know what to do, he doesn't know how to fix either of them. He doesn't even know how to fix himself.

"Before we came here, we went to the ancestral hall and I told our parents I'd never forgive them for what they said to Wei Wuxian," he says into the silence. "It's okay if you feel the same, A-jie."

"It's not!" Wei Wuxian bursts out with, scrubbing a hand across his face. "It's okay, it's fine, I – Madame Yu was right anyway, you shouldn't be angry with her, it was my fault. Don't be mad at your mother."

Having to listen to his brother defend his mother, who'd been so needlessly cruel to him, is something he hadn't had to live through the first time around. It's like his chest is being torn apart. "You didn't and it wasn't. How could you say that?"

A-jie's sob is the worst sound he's ever heard, right up there with her last, gurgling breath in the middle of a battlefield.

She flings herself at both of them, reaching out to pull them close enough so she can wrap her arms around them. She rises up on her knees enough so she can hook her chin over both their shoulders even as they both hug her back around the waist. "I loved my mother," she says, low and fierce, all of the anger she tucks away tempered into something sharper, something that burns. "But I love you both so much, and she didn't, and I hated her for it."

"She was cruel to you too," Jiang Cheng says, even if it feels like a betrayal to say it aloud. He never could have handled having this conversation the first time around, he was too raw, too close to it all. He can barely handle having it now.

A-jie shrugs, holding them all the tighter. "It didn't hurt as much when she was cruel to me. If I could have taken all of her harsh words and actions onto myself, I would have. If I could have taken her whip for you, I would have. I *love you*. Both of you. Do you understand? There's nothing that could make me love you any less. I don't know how. If I didn't know how to love you, I wouldn't know how to breathe."

It wasn't fair to A-jie, how much their parents had relied on her, how much she'd had to take care of them, but she did it so well.

"Shijie," Wei Wuxian whispers, and he can feel his brother shaking next to him. Jiang Cheng takes his hand, holding on tight, just like he had on the day their parents had sent them away from Lotus Pier.

"Won't you call me A-jie now?" she asks. "Mother isn't here to stop you. It's not your fault, and it's not a good thing she's gone, but she is gone. You don't have to be afraid of her anymore."

"I know," he says, but not exactly like he's agreeing with her.

In between this conversation, whatever he got up to this morning, and the fact that he clearly hasn't gotten enough sleep, Wei Wuxian is exhausted. It only takes a few minutes of quiet before he's slumping into them, barely able to keep his eyes open. They carefully maneuver him to get him to lay down, curled up on his side and holding his flute to his chest with his head in A-jie's lap. He almost looks peaceful like that.

"Did he try and call you A-jie?" he asks, keeping his voice low so he doesn't wake him.

She nods, undoing Wei Wuxian's ponytail so she can run a careful hand through his hair. "It was when he first came to live with us. It's what you called me, so it's what he called me. I didn't mind. Mother overheard and threatened to feed him to a pack of wild dogs if she ever heard him call me that again." Jiang Cheng's stomach rolls. "I don't mind remaining Shijie. It

means something different, between us. But I want him to know that he *can* call me that if he wants to. That it's what I am."

They're all so fucked up in so many different ways that the idea that they could fix each other is laughable. But they don't have to figure it out now. For right now, he can sit with his sister and brother, who love him, who are still alive, and leave the rest of it. For now.

When they leave for dinner, their clothing fixed and faces cleaned, Wei Wuxian is smiling.

~

That night he goes searching for Lan Wangji and when he finds him, he's with Wei Wuxian. On a roof.

How did he even get up there without his golden core? Does he have a talisman for it or did he just climb up there like a monkey with his bare hands? He can control his movements somewhat even without his golden core, but not well enough to easily jump on top of roofs. Jiang Cheng hadn't been super looking forward to this conversation to begin with, and this just makes it even worse.

He jumps up on the roof. Lan Wangji is sitting in a perfectly respectable manner, while Wei Wuxian is spread out with a bottle of liquor in his hands, face tipped back as he looks up at the stars. Jiang Cheng is almost sorry to ruin this nice moment, except that Wei Wuxian is his older brother, so mostly he's delighted to ruin this nice moment. "This is so gross, can you not act like this? Are you going to braid each other's hair next and sing under the moonlight? Lan Wangji, you should know that my brother is a shit braider. That's why his hair is always so simple."

"I like Wei Ying's hair," Lan Wangji says, then blinks, like can't believe he just said that.

Jiang Cheng can't believe he said it either. He's going to throw up all over both of them.

"I'm going to break your legs," Wei Wuxian threatens, but he hasn't even bothered to sit up, so he's not too worried. He's flushed, but Jiang Cheng doesn't know if it's from Lan Wangji or the alcohol.

"Give me that," he says, taking the bottle out of his brother's hands and taking a sip himself. He winces as it goes down. "This isn't even good."

"You're just too delicate to appreciate it," he insists. "Did you need me for something or are you just here to bother me?"

"I don't see why I can't do both." He sighs, leaning back on his hands. "I'm here on official sect leader business."

Wei Wuxian sits up. "You don't look like you're here on official sect leader business."

He'd dump the rest of this alcohol on his brother if he didn't know that it would completely derail the rest of this conversation. "Well, I was going to be formal about this, but then I found you two up here kissing and it seems silly to try and bow to anyone now."



“Weren’t kissing,” Lan Wangji says, and holy shit, he’s totally blushing. This is hilarious.

Wei Wuxian rolls over and Jiang Cheng tries to scramble away, but he’s not fast enough. Wei Wuxian sits on him and pins his arm to his back at an uncomfortable angle. It’s a good thing he doesn’t give a shit what Lan Wangji thinks of him. “You should be respectful of your elder brother!”

“You shouldn’t be kissing the Second Jade of Lan on top of roofs in the middle the night,” he retorts, and he’s learned a couple things in the past twenty years, so he flips them over, gets his arm back, and then has Wei Wuxian in a headlock. It only works because his brother lets it, and even still Jiang Cheng feels his brother tense up against his side. He just messes up his ponytail before letting him go, taking a half step back in case he needs the space.

He’s pretty sure *not* touching his brother is only going to make whatever the hell is going on in his head worse, but he also knows that sometimes touching *does* make it worse, and since Wei Wuxian won’t ever say anything about it, the only way he knows which is which is to pay attention, which he’s fucking terrible at. He’s been mostly guessing so far and Wei Wuxian hasn’t had a meltdown anywhere he can see so he’s assuming he hasn’t fucked up too badly. Yet.

Wei Wuxian is grinning as he sits back down, and if it looks a little forced, Jiang Cheng pretends not to notice. “What are you here for? Do you need me for something?”

“I was actually looking for Lan Wangji,” he admits. Maybe teasing him before asking him for a favor wasn’t the best of idea, except that he’s pretty sure Lan Wangji wouldn’t let anything get in the way of him helping his brother, even right now before he’s completely fallen in love with him. Or maybe he’s already in love with him, it’s not like Jiang Cheng is privy to Lan Wangji’s thoughts in any timeline. “Wei Wuxian said you had wanted to play for him and you thought it could help?”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, I’m fine,” Wei Wuxian insists.

They both ignore him.

“I think it would help if I play Cleansing,” he says, his dark eyes focused on Jiang Cheng. Just like before, Jiang Cheng can’t read a single emotion on his face unless it comes to his brother, then Lan Wangji is just painfully obvious. He turns to Wei Wuxian. “I understand that your cultivation is not the same as other demonic cultivation techniques. But it is not without harm. I want to mitigate some of that harm.”

Wei Wuxian has the same stubborn set to his mouth that he’s had since he was a toddler. For a moment he reminds him so painfully of Jin Ling he can’t breathe, but then it passes. He’ll have his nephew back again one day. Hopefully.

“As your clan leader, I’m ordering you to let him help you,” Jiang Cheng says, “and as your little brother, I’m asking you to.”

He pretty much never refers to himself as a little brother, even though obviously Wei Wuxian is older than him. It completely disarms Wei Wuxian, a delighted smile curling around his

lips before he snorts, tossing his head into the air and causing his lopsided ponytail to become even more of a disaster. “If it is for my beloved younger brother Jiang Cheng and the beautiful Huangang Jun, how can I refuse?”

It takes every shred of patience Jiang Cheng has not to push him off the roof.

~

When he eventually drags himself back to his room, leaving Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji still sitting on roof together, there’s someone there waiting for him.

Zidian is already sparking to life before he recognizes that it’s his sister, waiting for him alone in his room with only a single candle lit. “A-jie! Is something wrong?”

“I think you should tell him,” she says.

He truly has no idea what she’s talking about.

She smiles, patting the space next to her. This all feels uncomfortably like some sort of trap, but she’s A-jie, so he goes anyway. She tucks his hair behind his ear and says, “I think you should tell A-Xian the real reason you ended up back at Lotus Pier.”

For a moment, he forgets to breathe.

It’s been so long that he forgot that A-jie knew, that he’d told her the truth during those long three months of searching desperately for their brother. She’s the only one he’s ever told.

“No,” he says automatically. He’s never told him, not before he died or after.

“A-Cheng,” she sighs, taking his hand in between her own. “I know you don’t want to. I understand why you don’t want to. But I think it will help A-Xian a lot, to know.”

“It will make him feel so horribly guilty he’ll go drown himself in the nearest body of water deeper than two inches,” he says. “He’s already so,” he stops himself just before he says broken. It’s true, but A-jie already knows, and it doesn’t help anyone to say it.

She nods. “Yes. But didn’t you hear him today? He thinks our love is conditional. He thinks it’s something he can lose.” Shame bubbles up inside him, and he tamps it back down, because there’s no way he can explain to A-jie the way those words make bile rise in the back of his throat. He’d never stopped loving his brother, but fuck had it seemed like it. He’d stopped being *loyal* to him. “I think if you tell him what you did, maybe he won’t be so worried about it.”

He closes his eyes, taking in one breath, then two, and makes it to three before he bursts out with, “A-jie, it’s-” He can’t finish the sentence. Shameful? Embarrassing? Hurtful? This is going to hurt his brother to hear. He knows it will.

“I know,” A-jie says calmly, and when she looks at him like that, soft and sure and her back straight, he believes it, that she knows him down to his bones and loves him just the same. “Do it anyway.”

His older sister is telling him to something.

“Okay.”

How can he refuse?

~

Jiang Cheng can't bring himself to do it the next morning, or the morning after that. A-jie doesn't push, but she does frown a little deeper, and he can't put this off forever. He can't even put this off much longer, because soon enough his brother is going to make himself scarce and drawing him into any sort of serious conversation is not only going to be difficult, but will distract him from his work, which is the last thing he wants to do. They do need Wei Wuxian to win them the war, after all.

The third morning he goes to Wei Wuxian's room, turning the corner just in time to see Nie Mingjue step into his brother's room and close the door behind him.

For one horrifying moment he considers the idea that Wei Wuxian and Nie Mingjue have taken up with one another, but that idea is ridiculous. His brother hadn't been with anyone before, and he and Lan Wangji were even more nauseating to be around than last time. On one hand, Lan Wangji's love for Wei Wuxian is something he's counting on, and if he can just keep them from misunderstanding each other, they'll probably get there that much faster. On the other hand, Lan Wangji has a history of taking his brother away from him, and Jiang Cheng will tie him up with Zidian and throw him off of Lotus Pier if he tries that crap this time around. He wants his brother happy and safe, but he also wants him home.

He creeps forward, and eavesdropping is probably below his dignity as a sect leader, but definitely not below his dignity as Wei Wuxian's brother.

“-fine, really,” Wei Wuxian says.

There's a moment of silence, and Jiang Cheng really wishes he could see what was happening. “Huaisang is worried about you.”

“Surely you have better things to focus on than what's worrying Nie Huaisang? There's a bit of a war going on,” he says, going for flippant, or maybe even teasing.

Only Wei Wuxian would try and tease Nie Mingjue.

“Would you have better things to do, if something was worrying your younger brother?” he asks, still remarkably calm.

“What, is Nie Huaisang scared of me?” He says it like it's a joke, but it doesn't quite land that way.

Jiang Cheng is already standing to interrupt, to throw the door open, when Nie Mingjue says, “He's scared for you, I think. Not that he'll tell me anything. There is a war on. I do not have spare time to devote to everything that worries my brother, even if I would like to. But I

know you have been through something very difficult. The Nie Clan knows what it's like to manage difficulty, and to try and manage it alone. There are ways we could help."

"I'm not alone!" he shouts, echoing the thoughts in Jiang Cheng's own head.

"No," Nie Mingjue agrees, "you're not. Think about what I've said. I know you have always looked out for Huaisang, even though he's always getting you into trouble. I will help you if I can."

Wei Wuxian laughs, but it comes out a little off, like he's using it to cover something else up. "I was always the one getting him into trouble, remember?"

"Yes," he says, dry, "I know you both let everyone think that."

No matter what it looked like on the outside, it seemed like Nie Mingjue wasn't totally ignorant of his brother's intelligence. Or void of human emotions.

Jiang Cheng is almost certain that this conversation hadn't happened the first time around. It's good because it's one more person looking out for his brother, even if it's one of the last people he expected, and because it'll make saving Nie Mingjue that much easier.

As Nie Huaisang had explained it when they'd been planning all this out, the best way to save his brother and help the Nie Sect was to destroy the Ghost Blade and the haunted blades of his ancestors that were cursed with generations of resentful energy.

The only one who could do that was Wei Wuxian.

"You seem to solve a lot of your problems by throwing my brother at them and waiting for him to fix it," Jiang Cheng had said, more than a touch resentfully.

"Doesn't everyone?" he'd returned. Jiang Cheng hadn't answered him.

Wei Wuxian had struggled with the Ghost Blade before, freshly resurrected and with nothing to channel the massive resentful energy through but his own body, and he'd defeated it even then. But this time he'll be fresh. He'll know what he's getting himself into. He'll have the Stygian Tiger Amulet. Or well, that's what they're *hoping*, assuming Jiang Cheng can figure out some way to get Nie Mingjue to confide in Wei Wuxian a family secret so protected that he hadn't even told Nie Huaisang about it until several years after the war.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian says, bringing Jiang Cheng back to the here and now, where he's crouched outside of his brother's door and eavesdropping, like some sort of unscrupulous junior disciple. "Well."

"You don't have to answer me now. Just keep it in mind," Nie Mingjue says.

He hears his footsteps coming. He could run and hide. Instead he stands up and crosses his arms. Nie Mingjue sees him as soon as he steps outside. He doesn't seem surprised, but then again he never seems surprised. When he wants to, he has a poker face rivaling that of the Lan. He just inclines his head to Jiang Cheng, who smiles at him before he can think better of it.

Nie Mingjue had hated Wei Wuxian last time. It had made everything more difficult, had probably been one of the reasons Nie Huaisang had distanced himself from him even though he'd obviously known that the rumors weren't true. This is better.

He steps inside his brother's room. He's already dressed, looking down at his Chenqing, and doesn't look up even when Jiang Cheng clears his throat. He has deep bruises under his eyes, meaning he probably hadn't slept. Again. Maybe he should just wait to do this after all.

Except he knows he'll keep putting it off forever, and A-jie will just keep frowning at him, which he hates. "Wei Wuxian."

His brother's head jerks up, like he hadn't noticed him there. His smile only seems half faked, at least. "Jiang Cheng! Something wrong?"

"No," he says. Wei Wuxian quirks an eyebrow. "Come on a walk with me. I want to talk to you about something."

His back instantly straightens, eyes going wary. "Can't we talk here?"

"I'm not going to yell at you," he says. "Can't we just do this somewhere – else? Please?" Somewhere with less people. Somewhere that no one will come across or overhear them

"Something is bothering you," Wei Wuxian says quietly. Jiang Cheng nods and shrugs at the same time, then crosses his arms over his chest. "Is someone being mean to you? Do you need me to beat them up?"

"Wei Wuxian!" he snaps, rolling his eyes.

He grins, tucking his flute back into his belt. "Okay, okay, let's go for a walk."

Wei Wuxian leads the way, talking about little things, like how the food is good in the Unclean Realms and the alcohol is strong, and how nice some of the Jin disciples are, which is so weird because the Jin family was obnoxious, and it's a shame Mianmian hadn't made it here yet, because she was the nicest of all of them, and it really didn't make sense why she and the peacock got along so well when he was so terrible. It's a steady stream of commentary that Jiang Cheng contributes almost nothing to, and Wei Wuxian clearly doesn't expect him to. He knows something has upset him so he's trying to distract him from it, and it sort of works, but less because he finds his brother's chatter anything but annoying and more because he's trying so hard.

He realizes that letting Wei Wuxian lead the way was a mistake when they end up at the cliff's edge, probably the same place he'd gone when A-jie had went looking for him. "Let's go somewhere else."

Wei Wuxian cuts himself in the middle of a rant about Jin Zixuan, blinking. "Why?"

"I," he clears his throat. "It's. High."

"High," he repeats slowly. "What, are you afraid of heights now?"

He rolls his eyes. “No, of course not.” Maybe Wei Wuxian and heights, except that’s not right either. It’s not like he has a problem when his brother is flying with him or sitting on rooftops. “Just come here, will you?”

He starts walking backwards, towards the cliff’s edge, a mocking smile around his mouth. “What’s a little height to worry about? Come on, the view is nice when it’s not filled with whips. Come see.”

He’s inches from the edges, and Jiang Cheng knows his brother knows exactly what he’s doing, knows that he’s not actually in any real danger, but knowing doesn’t matter. “Wei Wuxian!” he shouts, and he doesn’t realize he’s moved until he’s at the cliff’s edge too, his hand clenched in the front of Wei Wuxian’s robes as he yanks away from the edge.

“Hey,” he says softly, putting his hand over Jiang Cheng’s. “Hey, I – what’s wrong?”

He tells himself to let go, that he’s overreacting and this is ridiculous and he can’t even explain why. He doesn’t. “Don’t go so close to the edge.”

“Okay,” he says, “I didn’t realize – okay. I won’t. What’s wrong?”

Jiang Cheng shakes his head, but he has to say something, it’s not like his brother will just let this go without some sort of explanation. “You don’t have your sword. What if you fell?”

“I’m not going to fall,” he says immediately. “I’m not the clumsy one.”

He doesn’t rise to the bait, even though he probably should. “But what if you did fall?”

His brother sighs, trying to seem exasperated but obviously still concerned. “I, Wei Wuxian, promise I won’t fall. Okay?”

“Okay,” he says. He’s going to hold him to that. He forces himself to let go of his brother and takes several steps back. “Okay. I have to tell you something. I wasn’t going to, but A-jie thinks I should, and I need you to just – let me say it, and not get upset or run away. And don’t interrupt.”

Wei Wuxian looks even more worried than before, but he nods.

Jiang Cheng paces, because it helps, because if he doesn’t move while he says this he doesn’t think he’ll be able to say it at all, because if he has to watch his brother’s face as he says it he knows he won’t be able to finish. “After our parents died, I didn’t go back to Lotus Pier for their bodies while you were gone. I left the room at the inn, I just needed to breathe, but I was standing in a corner, under an awning. I could see you. You’d gotten A-jie’s medicine and you were buying us food. But the Wen soldiers were coming down the street. They were headed towards you, and you wouldn’t be able to get away in time, and I knew you couldn’t fight them off, you could barely fucking stand, so I – stepped out of the awning. I let them notice me. I let them catch me so they wouldn’t catch you.”

He risks a glance up. Wei Wuxian is paler than he’s ever seen him, which is both worrying and impressive. “They could have killed you.”

“I’d assumed they would,” he answers honestly.

“You assumed,” he starts, then takes a deep breath. “You assumed – you – what about,” he stops and comes forward, shoving Jiang Cheng in the chest hard enough that he stumbles back. He regains his balance just in time for Wei Wuxian to come forward and shove him again. “YOU ASSUMED? Why would you do that? Don’t you have a brain? Didn’t you think about your parents? About Shijie?”

Jiang Cheng lets himself get pushed again. At least they’re getting further away from the cliff’s edge. “Of course I did,” he starts.

“You obviously didn’t!” Wei Wuxian shouts, cutting him off, and this is why Jiang Cheng had wanted to do this away from the Nie Sect Hall. “How could you do something so stupid?”

“I’d do it again,” he says easily.

“YOU COULD HAVE DIED!” Wei Wuxian roars, like he hadn’t heard him the first time. “You almost did! You lost your golden core! All because you were stupid enough to let yourself get taken! And you’d do it again? What’s wrong with you?”

“Weren’t you listening?” Jiang Cheng snaps, finally pushing him back. “They were coming for you! If I hadn’t done something, they would have taken you. You’d just gotten whipped half to death, you *would* be dead. If they’d beat you like they beat me, it would have killed you.”

Wei Wuxian laughs, and it’s a horrible sound. It reminds him of the Nightless City. “So what? You think that’s worth sacrificing your life?”

Jiang Cheng grabs the front of his brother’s robes like he’s going to try and shake some sense into him. “Don’t *fucking* say that! Who the fuck do you think you are? You don’t get to decide what I’m willing to sacrifice for you. I would die for you. A-jie would die for you.” Had died for him. “You’re our *brother*. I’ve spent my whole life being defined by you.” Wei Wuxian flinches, but for once Jiang Cheng doesn’t mean it in a bad way. “I don’t know who I am without you.”

He’d had to find out who he was without him, without A-jie. He hadn’t particularly liked the answer.

“But,” he says, tears finally starting to spill over his eyes, “that was – that was right after everything, and it was all my fault, and you were so angry at me, why would you-”

“The destruction of Lotus Pier wasn’t your fault,” he says. “They would have found an excuse. Mom was the one who escalated it, who provoked her. And it doesn’t matter how angry I was. There’s no level of anger that stops you from being my brother, it doesn’t work like that. Losing my golden core is the worst pain I’ve ever felt in my entire life. And even as it was happening, I was grateful that it was me and not you.”

It's why finding out that Wei Wuxian had given him his golden core had hurt so much, that everything that had happened to Wei Wuxian had been because he didn't have a golden core and it was because he'd given his away, because Jiang Cheng had gotten captured. It's as if his sacrifice had been worthless. He'd tried so hard to keep his brother safe, and in the end he'd caused so much of his pain, of their pain.

He's knows that he's not being fair. That he hadn't asked Wei Wuxian to give him his golden core. That he hadn't made his brother lie and hide from him. That so much of this could have been avoided if Wei Wuxian had told him what was going on, what was really wrong with him.

But it had *hurt*, to find out that the one time he'd thought he'd managed to save his brother, he'd damned him.

Jiang Cheng lets go of Wei Wuxian's robes but only so he can grab his shoulders, so he can look him in the eyes. "You are my brother. There is nothing you can do to change that. There is nothing you can do that will make me love you any less." Make loving him hurt, yes, but not make Jiang Cheng love him less.

Wei Wuxian stares at him for a long, tense moment and then he's reaching for him, burying his face in his shoulder and squeezing him so tightly he's almost worried his ribs will crack. He's shaking and Jiang Cheng doesn't say anything about the damp spot on his shoulder, or the tears covering his own face.

It's the first time his brother has initiated a hug since he's come back.

Maybe they will be okay.

## Chapter End Notes

me planning this chapter: time for plot!  
me writing this chapter: oh no more feelings

look the problem is there are so many conversations in canon that should have ended in hugs and tears and DIDN'T so now i have no choice but to fix that

i hope you liked it!

feel free to follow/harass me at: [shanastroyteller.tumblr.com](https://shanastroyteller.tumblr.com)



# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jiang Cheng had thought the next few weeks would go much as the same as last time. That Wei Wuxian would spend this time before the final battle of the Sunshine Campaign scribbling and planning in his room or disappearing for long hours to practice on his flute, reappearing only for the brief skirmishes they had on the border of the Unclean Realms. It was during these weeks the first time around that Jiang Cheng had learned to recognize the smell of sulphur as a sign of his brother had been using demonic cultivation, smelling it in the air around him after he'd been missing for hours.

It both does and doesn't happen that way again.

Wei Wuxian still spends all his time in his room, writing seals and composing music and a mess of other things that he doesn't understand. But his brother doesn't hide it this time.

A-jie brings Wei Wuxian all his meals and touches his hair and kisses his forehead before going back to her reading and reports or assisting the medics. These are all things she'd tried to do for Wei Wuxian last time, but the difference is this time he lets her, he doesn't bar her from entering his room unexpectedly or turn away from her. He's not afraid of her.

When he goes out to practice, Lan Wangji goes with him. They talk quietly and walk in step when they leave and come back, and Jiang Cheng obviously doesn't know what happens when they're gone, but even when Wei Wuxian reeks of sulphur, he's still smiling, still laughing at Lan Wangji even when the after effects of demonic cultivation are clinging to his skin.

He goes to the meetings, this time around.

Not every single one, but the important ones, and Jiang Cheng doesn't even have to ask. Wei Wuxian just shows up for them, and he's sure that he has A-jie to thank for that. She must be the one telling their brother when these things are happening, because he's definitely not paying enough attention to everything to know on his own, but it's enough that he's there. He doesn't contribute much, and Jiang Cheng's unsure if that's because he's trying not to challenge his authority as sect leader in front of others or if he's just distracted thinking about his plan for the war. But it doesn't matter. He shows up. He's there, a warm steady presence at Jiang Cheng's back, and it calms him in a way he hadn't expected. Every sort of irritation and worry is easier to withstand with his elder brother by his side, with someone who will catch his eye and pointedly not laugh when someone says something ridiculous or who'll knock elbows into him when his rage threatens to get the better of him.

Part of him aches that he hadn't had this the first time around. The rest of him knows he couldn't have had it like this, that he wouldn't be able to accept Wei Wuxian as he was back then with the knowledge he'd had of what was going on, that even if Wei Wuxian had showed up like Jiang Cheng had begged him to it would likely just end in another argument

between them about his sword, about his silence, about the sharpness hanging around him. Some of that is Wei Wuxian's fault, some of it's his, but there's not use assigning blame to it. Not anymore.

That pain and confusion and fear is now just a memory. His new, tenuous reality includes a Wei Wuxian that knows his siblings love him no matter what, that knows Lan Wangji doesn't want to punish him, and who isn't constantly being asked or scolded about not carrying a sword. This Wei Wuxian isn't bleeding from quite as many invisible wounds and is able to give to all of them what he couldn't before.

"He seems like he's doing better," Nie Mingjue tells him at the tail end of another strategy meeting. Wei Wuxian hadn't attended this one, but considering this morning he'd seen his brother excitedly pulling on Lan Wangji's sleeves as they'd headed off into the woods, he's not that surprised. Clearly he's trying out something complicated, and this meeting had been more ironing out fine details than anything else, so Jiang Cheng hadn't even expected him to show up. Lan Wangji hadn't attended either, which in the first timeline would have been unthinkable, but in this one is hardly worth notice. Everyone knows that Lan Wangji is assisting Wei Wuxian with his cultivation techniques and doing so with his elder brother's blessing.

He's pretty sure having the support of the Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen is doing more for Wei Wuxian's reputation than anything else. After all, if the honorable Jades of Lan approve, then surely Wei Wuxian can't be doing anything truly terrible.

Jiang Cheng glances around, but Nie Huaisang had bolted as soon as the meeting was over. The youngest Nie brother is another thing that's different this time around. Before, he'd stuck close to his brother and his clan after the disastrous banquet, but now he still takes the time to talk to Wei Wuxian, mostly catching him as he's walking with Lan Wangji and peeling off once they get to the border. He also spends a lot of time drinking with Jiang Cheng while they complain about how ridiculous Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian are and about the prettiness of various disciples and who's the best fighter. He tries to be Sect Leader Jiang around everyone else, but there's no point with Nie Huaisang since he can just see through it anyway. Having someone he can act his age – or well, supposed age – around who isn't his either of his siblings makes going through this whole war for a second time that much easier to bear.

Jin Zixuan and Jin Zixun have just stepped outside. Lan Xichen is walking towards the door, but more slowly than he might otherwise, and Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes before saying, "Lan Xichen, you can stay if you want. I'm sure you have an even more vested interest in my brother's wellbeing, since it's so closely tied to *your* brother's wellbeing."

Nie Mingjue's eyes widen before he coughs, and Jiang Cheng is concerned for a second before he realizes he's doing it to hide his laughter. Lan Xichen raises both eyebrows. They stare at each other for a moment before Lan Xichen checks the door and walks back over to them. "I did not think Wangji was so easy for others to read."

"He's not, but Wei Wuxian is," Jiang Cheng says. "Well, at least about this." His brother does absolutely nothing to hide his infatuation with Lan Wangji and he never has. Mortal injuries, trauma, any sort of negative emotion? That he hides, but his love he gives freely.

“Huaisang had mentioned they seemed closer than they had at Cloud Recesses,” Nie Mingjue offers.

He snorts. “Wei Wuxian was so embarrassing. I’m pretty sure he was going to try composing sonnets next.”

Lan Xichen gives a smile that’s slightly larger than bland, polite smile he shows to everyone before asking, “So he is doing better?”

“Your brother playing for him helps,” he says. He’s sat in on it a few times. It’s calming for him to listen to, he feels more centered even when it’s not being directed at him. “With the physical stuff. We’re working on the other stuff. Kind of. Mostly we’re just trying to be around in case he needs us.” In case he feels like admitting he needs them.

“This new type of cultivations takes a heavy toll, then?” Nie Mingjue asks.

Jiang Cheng viciously shoves down his instinctual response, which is that it’s none of his business and to leave Wei Wuxian to him. That hadn’t helped him before and it won’t help him now. Besides, he needs to be honest with Nie Mingjue, because after this war is over, he needs Nie Mingjue to ask for their help. “Yes. It’s powerful, but it’s efficacy depends on Wei Wuxian’s strength and his control of it on his clarity of thought, and it’s only possible to begin with because of his skill at channeling it through his spiritual tools.”

“Wangji has been very impressed with Wei Wuxian’s mastery over this new cultivation technique,” Lan Xichen says, but he’s not smiling anymore.

“And worried?” Jiang Cheng follows it up with. Lan Xichen presses his lips together, then nods. “I know. I am too. But it’s the middle of a war. I don’t want anything to happen to my brother. But I can’t give up any advantage it gives us.” And it’s the only way his brother has left to cultivate. Even once the war ends, he won’t ask Wei Wuxian to stop.

Nie Mingjue has a strange look on his face. It takes Jiang Cheng a long moment to recognize it as hesitation. He slowly lifts a hand and places it on Jiang Cheng’s shoulder. “You’re dealing with a lot and taking care of your elder brother on top of it. It’s very admirable.”

He flushes and looks away. “He’s always taken care of me. We take care of each other.”

“All the same,” Lan Xichen says simply.

He rubs the back of his neck and smiles at both of them.

He’s playing this game with a stacked deck, but it’s still nice to hear that he’s playing it well.

~

Jiang Cheng is alerted to the last of the Jin’s meager forces arriving by Wei Wuxian jumping up and waving. “Mianmian! Over here!”

Lan Wangji stiffens beside them, his eyes sliding away from the rapidly approaching golden clad figure. Jiang Cheng doesn’t laugh at him, but it’s a near thing.

“You’re okay!” Mianmian shouts before yanking Wei Wuxian into a tight, quick hug. His face freezes in surprise before it softens. He moves to hug her back but she’s already pulling away. She punches him in the arm and he groans and clutches it, giving her an exaggerated wounded face. “That’s for worrying everyone!”

“You were worried?” he teases, but his eyes are wide. Like he hadn’t expected it, as if he thought everyone who cared about him could be counted on one hand.

Jiang Cheng has already shed so many tears because of his brother and he refuses to shed any more, especially in front of a Jin disciple.

Mianmian rolls her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. “Of course I was! I was so happy when we got word that you’d gotten away and I wanted to come here immediately but Sect Leader Jin wouldn’t,” she stops herself and her smile becomes strained before she continues, “I’m glad to see you’re okay and I’m excited to share the battlefield with you again!”

Jiang Cheng stops himself from saying anything disparaging about Jin Guangshan, but it’s a near thing. Just like last time, the last of the people he’d been willing to send are arriving at the eleventh hour, just days before they’re leaving to begin the final campaign.

“Thank you Mianmian,” Wei Wuxian says earnestly.

She scoffs and then seems to realize Wei Wuxian isn’t alone and she’s been ignoring them because red rushes to her cheeks and she hastily bows in his direction. “Sect Leader Jiang. Hanguang Jun. It’s good to see you both again.”

“Hm,” Lan Wangji says, but there’s no amount of jealousy that can keep him from returning her bow. “Yes.”

“It’s good to see you too,” Jiang Cheng says. She’d left the Jin sect last time before she’d disapproved of their treatment of Wei Wuxian. She’d done more to defend his brother last time than he had, and even as that makes him burn with shame, it gives him hope too. She’d trusted and believed in Wei Wuxian before even when no one else would, never forgetting the boy who’d taken a branding iron meant for her and told jokes when she’d been upset after, and he thinks she can be one more person who can help keep Wei Wuxian from leaving them. Well, assuming Lan Wangji doesn’t kill her with the jealousy in his heart alone.

It would solve several problems if Lan Wangji would just kiss his brother and put everyone out of their misery.

“Is Jiang Yanli here to?” she asks, turning her head as if expecting her to walk around the corner.

“She is,” Jiang Cheng says. “Why don’t you come to dinner with us tonight? Assuming my brother can manage to pull himself from his studies for long enough to eat a meal outside of his room.”

Wei Wuxian rolls his eyes but then bows to Mianmian with a hand over his heart. “For the pleasure of being in the presence of the lovely Mianmian, I could manage anything.”

Lan Wangji's face is completely blank but the death grip he has on Bichan is very telling.

Mianmian hits the top of Wei Wuxian's head with her sword. He clutches his head and pouts, but she only rolls her eyes. "Don't play those games with me, they don't work. I'm going to have to catch up with Jin Zixuan tonight, but what about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow it is," Jiang Cheng says.

"Thank you for the invitation, Sect Leader Jiang," she says formally before turning back to Wei Wuxian, her face turning serious. "I heard what you did to Jin Zixun."

His brother's face closes off and Jiang Cheng feels a thread of panic. He doesn't want to snap at her because he doesn't want to alienate her, but he refused to apologize for what happened to Jin Zixun and he won't let Wei Wuxian apologize for it either.

She looks around them before leaning forward, going up on her tiptoes and balancing herself with a hand on Wei Wuxian's shoulder so that she can whisper in his ear.

Jiang Cheng doesn't hear what she says, but whatever it is makes Wei Wuxian throw his head back and laugh, full bellied and obnoxious and completely genuine. Even Lan Wangji can't help softening at the sound.

Mianmian winks at Wei Wuxian, bows to both him and Lan Wangji, then hurries away to rejoin the rest of her sect.

"Isn't it great that Mianmian is here?" Wei Wuxian asks, throwing an arm around Lan Wangji's shoulders.

"Hm," he answers. He reminds stiff for a moment longer before leaning the tiniest bit into Wei Wuxian's touch and his brother's smile in response is blinding. They're so close it would only like one little push to close the last few inches of space between their mouths.

Jiang Cheng can't stand to watch another moment of this.

"I'm going to go somewhere that's not here," he announces. Nie Huaisang is around here somewhere and needs to complain about all this to someone.

They don't even acknowledge him as he walks away, still very busy staring into each other's eyes.

Maybe he should just draw up a marriage proposal to submit to Lan Xichen and see how long it takes the two of them to figure out they're engaged.

~

When he and Wei Wuxian enter their sister's room the next night, Mianmian is already there with A-jie, laughing and talking, their heads bent together.

Jiang Cheng can't help but like her a little more for it. It's hard for A-jie to have friends considering she spends so much time doing work beneath her title, as even if they're friendly

the field medics and kitchen staff can't treat A-jie like an equal, and her weak cultivation means many of their peers don't spend much time with her.

It's comforting to him, the idea that when A-jie marries Jin Zixuan she'll have someone on her side in the Jin sect, someone who likes her and doesn't blindly bow her head to the Jin's will. Mianmian will break before she bends, which is probably why she likes Wei Wuxian so much, since he's just the same. He selfishly hopes her friendship with A-jie grows, because those are the exact kind of people he wants around his sister.

"Getting started without us?" Wei Wuxian teases, sprawling next to Mianmian and knocking their shoulders together. Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes and sits next to A-jie in a less embarrassing manner as she starts uncovering the dishes.

Mianmian elbows Wei Wuxian. "You shouldn't interrupt your elder sister, who taught you manners?"

"Me, unfortunately," A-jie says, eyes sparkling.

Jiang Cheng's laughter blends with Mianmian's as Wei Wuxian squawks in protest.

They don't discuss anything serious, talking around the war rather than talking about it, and it's a nice, normal meal with a friend on the edge of war.

Mianmian doesn't ask Wei Wuxian about his absent sword.

It's too bad he has a vested interest in keeping Mianmian in the Jin sect, otherwise he'd go ask Nie Huaisang about scheming to get her defect to Yunmeng.

~

Jiang Cheng is a deep sleeper. Except when it comes to his brother.

When Wei Wuxian first came to live with them, they shared a room. Jiang Cheng would wake up to him whimpering or crying or worst of all being completely silent with big fat tears running down his face. Sometimes all Jiang Cheng could think to do would be to go get A-jie, who would heat up soup and dry his tears and place them both on either side of her as she rubbed their backs and ran her hands through their hair.

But sometimes he was so tired and so young that he'd just cross the room and push Wei Wuxian over, crawling into bed next to him and letting Wei Wuxian clutch his sleeve and not say anything about it in the morning.

When he wakes up in the middle of the night, nothing seems wrong, but he can tell that he's not alone. He continues breathing deeply, keeping his eyes closed as he tries to decide whether Zidian or his sword is closer.

Then he hears a sigh and he *knows*. He shoves himself upright, flicking his heavy braid over his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Wei Wuxian is kneeling next to his bed, wearing only a pale sleeping robe and Chenqing in his hand. His hair is a mess, in his typical ridiculous bun on top of his head with thick strands falling around his face. If he'd just braid it to sleep like the rest of them, he wouldn't have to spend so long brushing it out in the morning. "Sorry," he says, and his voice sounds rough, like he's been crying. Or screaming. "I didn't mean to wake you up, I just – sorry."

He hurries to stand, but Jiang Cheng's hand shoots out and he grabs ahold of his brother's arm. "What's wrong?" he repeats.

"I said sorry, I'm going," he says, tugging at his grip. But just like with A-jie, Wei Wuxian won't force Jiang Cheng to let him go, afraid of hurting him. Jiang Cheng wishes that behavior didn't end at physical concerns. "You need to sleep. Tomorrow's a big day."

Tomorrow they leave the Unclean Realm and set up camp for the final battle of the Sunshot Campaign.

"Did you have another nightmare?" he asks. It's not something they've discussed, really, but he knows his brother isn't getting enough sleep, that there are nights when dreams only allow him a couple hours of sleep or he doesn't get any rest at all.

He can feel Wei Wuxian trembling under his hand, and he tugs him forward, manhandling him so he's sitting next to him on the bed. He won't look at him, but he does say, "I just. Had to see."

"See what?" he prompts when he doesn't say anything more.

Wei Wuxian's face creases in pain, then he's twisting in his grip, but not pulling away. He presses his fingers against Jiang Cheng's wrist, and he can't tell if Wei Wuxian is feeling for his pulse or the thrum of his golden core, but either way it breaks his heart. "I'll go," he says, making to stand.

Jiang Cheng yanks him back down. They are way too old for this, but he's too concerned to care. "Come on, just stay here."

"Stay?" he repeats incredulously.

He scoots closer to the wall, leaving enough room for Wei Wuxian to lie down next to him. "You had a dream I was gone and you wanted to make sure I wasn't, right?" he asks. Wei Wuxian stares at him for a moment before looking away and nodding. "So just stay here, we have to be up in a few hours anyway, and maybe this way you'll manage to get some actual sleep."

"We're not kids anymore," Wei Wuxian says, but he's not leaving.

Jiang Cheng shrugs and lays back down, turning his back to his brother. Nothing happens for several long moments, then Wei Wuxian sighs, as if Jiang Cheng is the exasperating one, and lays down next to him, pulling the covers over both of them and pressing their backs together.

He smiles into his pillow and falls asleep like that, pressed back to back against his brother.

~

“You’re sure you don’t want to fly ahead with us?” Jiang Cheng asks his brother the next morning. “You can stand on my sword with me if you want.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yes, we’ll make such an intimidating sight, flying in together on the same sword like I’m a kid.”

“It’s not like our enemies will live long enough to remember how we looked when we arrived,” he says and his brother’s smirk turns a shade closer to vicious but he shakes his head. Jiang Cheng shrugs and says, “Hanguang Jun.”

Lan Wangji turns to face him, head tilted to the side.

“Watch my brother’s back out there,” he says. “I’m trusting you.”

If there’s one thing he can trust Lan Wangji to do, it’s look out for his brother.

“I can take care of myself!” Wei Wuxian says indignantly.

They ignore him.

“I will, Sect Leader Jiang,” Lan Wangji says formally.

Wei Wuxian still looks scandalized by this interaction, but Jiang Cheng just claps him on the shoulder and says, “Don’t do something that’ll upset A-jie, like dying,” before stepping onto his sword and rising into the air.

“That goes for you too!” Wei Wuxian shouts after him. “Don’t do anything to make Shijie cry!”

If they weren’t surrounded by so many foreign disciples, he’d flip him off. As is he just rolls his eyes and waves at his brother as he flies ahead, towards the battlefield.

~

Jiang Cheng had tried suggesting they hold off on the attack a few days, because he knew in that time Lan Xichen was going to receive the map that would allow them to sneak into the heart of the Nightless City, but it’s not like he could say that, so he hadn’t been very persuasive. Part of him had wanted to order Wei Wuxian to come with them, if only because he knew what they would be facing and he knew the only one who stood a chance against their enemies is his brother.

He’d decided against it. What Wei Wuxian had pulled off in the final battle is a thing of fairytale and legend and Jiang Cheng can’t risk him being too tired out by a relatively minor battle to manage it. Wei Wuxian had won the war in a single battle, all on his own, and Jiang Cheng can’t risk that not happening again.

But he can try to mitigate the slaughter.



The Jin and Jiang had suffered major losses and gained no ground during the first attack, the one taken while everyone else was busy setting up camp nearby. The purpose of it had been to make sure no one paid attention to them, so that they could travel and set up without being caught, but it had backfired. That initial battle had lost too many, and it wasn't like the Jiang were exactly robust with numbers to begin with.

He can't stop the battle and he can't win it. But he can at least make sure that less of his people die this time than last time.

"Stay together and stay behind me until I say otherwise," he orders his people, sword in hand even as Zidian sparks in anticipation. There are a few confused murmurings, but they all fall into place without question.

The Lan disciples don't do anything for a long moment. There's not that many of them, the bulk of them set to moving the camp, but that included Lan Wangji, and Lan Xichen was away on an information gathering mission, so they don't have a leader here. Instead they were told to follow both of them, but not who to listen to if there was a disagreement. Some sort of silent conversation must pass between them, because the Lan all move to join the Jiang disciples without a word.

Jin Zixuan frowns. "We should split up. We'll cover more ground that way and we'll manage to surprise them. We're sure to be noticed in a big group like this."

"Do what you want," he says tersely. "I don't command you. But your people's blood is on your hands." He doesn't have the time or patience trying to convince Jin Zixuan of a plan that he has no reason to think is a good idea. He doesn't want to see the Jin slaughtered, of course, but his first concern has to be his own people.

Jin Zixuan stares at him for a long moment then shouts, "Stay together. Don't disperse until I give the order."

Jiang Cheng shoots him a surprised glance, but Jin Zixuan is facing away from him. They creep forward into the border of the Nightless City together. When the fierce corpses attack, it's not in small groups they can easily pick apart. It quickly becomes apparent that they're not normal soldiers, that they can't die. He hadn't forgotten how terrifying the fierce corpses were, exactly, but the experience has been dulled by nearly two decades, and facing them on the battlefield again is just as hopeless as the last time.

He doesn't waste time trying to maintain his image this time around. He knew from the beginning that this wasn't a battle he'd return victorious from. "We have to retreat," he tells Jin Zixuan even as he swings Zidian in arc around them, pushing back another wave of fierce corpses. "I'm getting my people out of here."

His face tightens in displeasure, but he nods. Jiang Cheng can't help the swell of relief. He would have left the Jin behind if he'd had to, if his only other choice was to stay and watch members of his clan be killed, but he's glad he doesn't have to.

There's a scream, too close, and he looks up just in time to see a fierce corpse stepping over a body clad in Jiang purple, raising a sword to cut down Jin Zixuan.

He reacts without thinking, pulling Jin Zixuan behind him and not moving away fast enough. There's a fierce pain up his side and he bites back a scream even Jin Zixuan fights the fierce corpse back. He stumbles before forcing himself upright, pressing a hand against his side to stem the flow of blood. It's not a mortal wound, especially not with a quick application of spiritual energy. Having Wei Wuxian's core explains a lot about his brother's disregard for his personal safety. It generates such a large, strong amount of spiritual energy that injuries that would have laid him out for weeks now heal in days. It also explains how Wei Wuxian had managed to do so much after being whipped half to death by his mother.

"Jiang Wanyin!" He startles at the use of his courtesy name. Almost no one calls him that, since his brother calls him Jiang Cheng and their peers pretty much always follow his lead, even when they pretend not to.

Jin Zixuan grabs onto him, eyes wide, and he forces himself to pull away. "I'm fine."

"You're not. Why did you do that?" he demands.

He rolls his eyes and says shortly, "I didn't do it for you."

If Jin Zixuan dies, he'll never get his nephew back. At this point, saving Jin Zixuan is as good as saving Jin Ling.

Jin Zixuan opens his mouth to say something else, but Jiang Cheng doesn't care. "RETREAT!" he bellows, stepping onto his sword and rising past where the fierce corpses can reach. "Carry any wounded you can! Retreat!"

The Jiang and Lan disciples don't hesitate to obey, and Jin Zixuan is shouting out the same orders a half second later, so they're all rising into the sky, many of them carrying wounded across their backs.

He looks down at the screaming fierce corpses. There are losses of course, but it's closer to what they were expecting and less of a massacre. He tells himself it's a win.

It's not a win for their fallen brothers and sisters, of course.

~

Even though the losses weren't as bad as they were the first time around, Nie Mingjue is just as furious at himself, just as willing to take all the blame for this failure onto his shoulders. Jiang Cheng didn't know any better before, but this time he's older than Nie Mingjue, has seen more battles than him, and can't stand by and watch him tear himself apart over a loss that there was no reasonable way he could have anticipated. It's not as if Yin Iron infected fierce corpses are something they trained for as children.

"Sect Leader Nie," Jiang Cheng says, pretty sure that this is a mistake but unable to stop himself from making it. "Please forgive me for what I'm about to say next. It's a wonder your spine doesn't snap in half with all the weight you're trying to carry."

He's never seen Nie Mingjue shocked before. It's a bit of rush, if he's honest. "What?"

“You are our commander, but you are not a god,” he says. “It was a good plan. It was a necessary plan. What would we have done if the delegation had been spotted and attacked instead? They wouldn’t have been all able to retreat without losing all our supplies, the Wens would have been alerted to our location, and we wouldn’t have just lost a battle. We would have lost the war. Having us advance and attack was not only the right call, but the only call. You shouldn’t blame yourself for the casualties of war that you could not have prevented.”

Both Jin Zixuan and Nie Mingjue are staring at him in surprise. He’s probably showing his hand a little too much here, since he definitely didn’t have the eloquence or experience to say such things the first time he lived through this meeting, but he can’t just sit there and watch Nie Mingjue torture himself needlessly.

They’re all saved from the uncertain silence by Lan Xichen returning from his information gathering mission waving the Formation Map of Qishan in the air. If he notices the strange tension, he doesn’t say anything about it.

Nie Mingjue still volunteers for what is essentially a suicide mission, to sneak into the Nightless City and kill Wen Ruohan, but at least this time he seems slightly less like he’s doing it to repent for the terrible sin of not being an all knowing general. Jiang Cheng doesn’t argue against it only because he knows he lives through it. Assuming none of his actions have altered this timeline enough that he doesn’t, and if that’s the case he’s pretty sure the Nie Huaisang from his original timeline will find a way to astral project to him just to strangle him for not only *not* saving his brother, but getting him killed even earlier than last time.

Once the meeting is over, Jiang Cheng allows a medic to bandage his wound and apply some horrible smelling paste to it, but his spiritual energy is already hard at work at healing the damage. He’s just stepped out of the medic tent when he hears his name and turns just in time to see his brother rushing towards him from where the infected are laid out. Lan Wangji follows behind him at a more sedate pace.

“They said you were hurt,” he says, hands hovering over him, like he wants to touch him but doesn’t want to risk hurting him.

He pulls his brother into a quick hug, ignoring the flare of pain along his side. “It’s fine, it’s basically nothing.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes narrow and Jiang Cheng is already bored of the hypocritical lecture he can sense coming. As if his brother has the right to give anyone crap about underplaying a wound, and he’s not even underplaying it. He really is fine. In a few days it’ll be like nothing even happened.

Oh, no, now he’s starting to sound like Wei Wuxian.

“I’ll show you later,” he says hastily, both in a bid to stave off the lecture and also because when he starts acting like his brother, he knows he’s made a wrong turn somewhere.

He doesn’t look pacified by that at all, which Jiang Cheng is pretty sure means he’s still going to get a lecture.

“YOUNG MASTER WEI! YOUNG MASTER WEI!” They all startle and turn to see a Jin disciple sprinting towards them. “It’s Lady Jiang! Come quick!”

“Shijie?” Wei Wuxian asks, but he’s already running, the Jin disciple leading him away.

Jiang Cheng means to follow, but Lan Wangji puts his arm in front of his chest. He can only blink down at it, incredulous. “If you want that arm to stay attached to the rest of your body, you’ll get out of my way.”

“You’re injured,” he says calmly. “Do not go running off and aggravate your wound further. Whatever has transpired, Wei Ying will take care of your sister. You should take care of yourself so as to not further upset your siblings.”

How can Wei Wuxian like this guy? Jiang Cheng wants to punch him in the face.

The most annoying part is that he’s right.

“Fine,” he says through clenched teeth. “If I promise just to walk really quickly will you get the fuck out of my way?”

Lan Wangji lowers his arms and keeps pace with him the entire time, so he can’t just go into a sprint as soon as he turns a corner, which is really annoying.

They end up at Jin Zixuan’s tent, which is just typical. Two decade old memories are surfacing. He thinks this happened last time too, something about Jin Zixuan being a jerk and Wei Wuxian beating up a dozen Jin disciples, which after their staggering loss that Wei Wuxian hadn’t been there for, hadn’t exactly gone over well. He remembers yelling at Wei Wuxian over it but doesn’t know if he ever found out exactly what happened.

Lan Wangji stands outside the tent, apparently choosing now to decide there’s some sort of line when it comes to sticking his nose into Jiang business and this is it. Jiang Cheng doesn’t go in either, instead pulling the flap of the tent back just enough to see inside.

He’s doing a lot more eavesdropping this time around.

A-jie is crying, the front of her robes wet with her own tears, and Wei Wuxian is standing in front of her. Jin Zixuan is facing away from them while Mianmian is between him and Wei Wuxian, and a half dozen Jin disciples are on the other end of the tent, the side closest to him and Lan Wangji.

“You have good timing,” Wei Wuxian says to Mianmian, voice tight with a boiling rage that Jiang Cheng has only heard a few times in his life. It’s just as scary every time. “Tell me what happened.”

A-jie reaches for Wei Wuxian’s arm, trying to tug him away. “I’m fine, A-Xian, let’s just go.”

She can’t stop crying even as she says that. She’s obviously not fine.

“Tell me,” Wei Wuxian repeats.

Mianmian glances back towards Jin Zixuan, who callously orders her to tell the truth, since apparently they're the shameful ones here. Implying that they're not, that *A-jie* is the one acting shamefully.

Jiang Cheng's hands curl into fists. Lan Wangji actually looks concerned for a moment before his face smooths out again, although it becomes subtly tenser as Mianmian explains how Jin Zixuan had been cruel to A-jie after not realizing she'd been making him food every day and then humiliated her in front of a group of people, how he told her to have some dignity. A-jie, of all people.

"Have some dignity?" Wei Wuxian hisses. "How dare you speak to Shijie like that!"

His brother's punches don't need to have spiritual energy behind them to send Jin Zixuan stumbling back and onto a table, breaking it in half. He hopes he boke a rib. The Jin disciples rush forward, but it only takes a single note on Chenqing to take all of them out.

Jin Zixuan cautiously pushes himself to his feet. Even he knows that he can't beat Wei Wuxian, sword or no sword. Mianmian twists her hands together but doesn't get in the way.

A-jie grabs onto Wei Wuxian's arm, trying to pull him back, but he doesn't react, just lets A-jie tug on him without moving. "You arrogant jackass! Following you to suffer on the battlefield? Is that what you think she's doing? Idiot! Who organizes and summarizes the field reports? Who oversees the kitchens and our food stores? Who assists the medics and tracks their supplies?" Jin Zixuan's eyes widen and he glances at Shijie, but she's not looking at him, still trying to pull Wei Wuxian away. "Shijie is here because she's trying to win this war! She's here because it's where Jiang Cheng is! She's here because she is Lady Jiang of the Yunmeng Jiang and it's her *duty*. What the fuck does any of that have to with *you*?"

Jin Zixuan opens his mouth but nothing comes out, so he closes it. Wei Wuxian pulls his hand back again, but seems to realize that he can't close the space between them to punch Jin Zixuan in the face without either shaking off A-jie or taking her with him, and obviously unwilling to do either, so he freezes like that.

Jiang Cheng comes forward, stepping over the unconscious Jin disciples. Lan Wangji follows a step behind him. "That's enough, Wei Wuxian."

His brother takes in a deep, slow breath, but doesn't lower his hand. Lan Wangji places his hand over Wei Wuxian's fist, not grabbing it or forcing it down, just a light touch. He wonders if this counts as them holding hands.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji says softly.

His brother lowers his hand.

Jiang Cheng turns to Jin Zixuan, making sure his disgust and contempt is obvious. "Of course, as a sect leader, there are greater implications if I had been the one to lay hands on the heir to another sect."

In other words, the only reason he's not joining his brother in teaching him some manners is because he's not actually trying to start a war between the Jin and Jiang sects.

"Jiang Cheng," he starts.

He snorts and Jin Zixuan falls silent. "You will refer to me as Sect Leader Jiang." Because him being a sect leader is the only thing keeping Jin Zixuan from ending up on the wrong end of Zidian. He presses a hand against his side, on the wound he got taking a blow meant for Jin Zixuan and repeats what he said before. "I didn't do it for you."

He'd been talking about Jin Ling when he'd said that, but all the better if Jin Zixuan thinks that he was talking about A-jie, since after all like he can say he was talking about his unborn nephew, and it twists the knife a little deeper.

"Let's go," he says, turning away and walking out of the tent. Wei Wuxian follows him, an arm around A-jie's shoulders as he guides her out, with Lan Wangji a couple steps behind both of them.

All four of them somehow end up in the Jiang tent while A-jie looks over his wound, because the fastest way to calm her down is to give her something or someone to take care of. Sometimes she and Wei Wuxian are so similar it's a little bit painful. He's pretty sure his brother learned to fake happiness and a constant smile by watching A-jie whenever their mother would yell at her.

"I should have been there," Wei Wuxian says, pacing in the tent. Lan Wangji is just standing in the corner. Jiang Cheng kind of wants to tell him to get lost, except that he knows then Wei Wuxian will become even more anxious and unmanageable if he does, and he doesn't have the patience for that right now.

He rolls his eyes. "It's fine. Besides, you and Lan Wangji needed to clear the area." It's where they'd been off to when he and the others had returned from the battle with the fierce corpses. Normally they would have sent several teams of four cultivators out, but instead Nie Mingjue had just sent Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. It had rubbed some people the wrong way, but it's easier for two people to move around unnoticed than a couple dozen, and frankly there aren't many threats that can't be handled by the two of them apart, never mind together.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head, but whatever he's planning to say to that is interrupted by Mianmian stepping into their tent. She focuses on his wound and Jiang Cheng ignore the rush of embarrassment as he quickly shrugs his inner robe back on, so at the very least he's not standing there bare chested.

"Apologies, Sect Leader Jiang," she says, looking away and going into a bow just a little too deep for their respective social positions.

Wei Wuxian goes over, gently pulling her up from her bow. Lan Wangji looks both like he'd rather be anywhere else and also like he'd rather stab out his own eye than leave Wei Wuxian with her. "Mianmian, stop that. I'm sorry for yelling at you earlier."

“It’s okay,” she says, looking past Wei Wuxian to A-jie, “I just wanted to make sure that Jiang Ya – that Lady Jiang was okay.”

“Oh, don’t do that,” A-jie says, stepping forward to smooth the line of Mianmian’s robes. “Don’t be so formal with me. I’m okay, really.”

“I wish,” she starts, then shakes her head. “He should have stopped, when he noticed we could hear him, no matter what he thought.”

Several things slot into place.

“It was you who sent that boy to get Wei Wuxian, wasn’t it?” Jiang Cheng asks.

Mianmian shrugs, but by the way she suddenly won’t meet his eyes, he’s right.

“You had to have known that Wei Wuxian wouldn’t let that slide, that he’d punish Jin Zixuan for his words,” he continues. She knew what he’d done to Jin Zixun and she’d sent for him anyway.

Mianmian looks down, but it’s not enough to hide her smile. “What I know is that Wei Wuxian always does the right thing, no matter how inconvenient it is for both himself and those around him.”

It’s one of the worst things about his brother, as far as Jiang Cheng is concerned, considering all the problems it has caused, but Mianmian says it like it’s one of his best.

Wei Wuxian’s whole face is red and A-jie’s smile is particularly pleased, which is especially nice after seeing her cry.

Lan Wangji doesn’t look jealous anymore, instead he slides his gaze from Mianmian to Wei Wuxian, head tilted slightly to the side, as if he’s considering Mianmian’s words, as if he’s considering Wei Wuxian in a slightly different light.

Jiang Cheng *really* likes Mianmian. It’s a shame he can’t lure her away to the Jiang Sect.

~

The next night, Nie Mingjue finds him after dinner and starts talking about battle plans for their upcoming attack, so of course Jiang Cheng walks with him, and it seems perfectly natural for Lan Xichen to join them and make his own quiet, subtle observations, and it’s not until he’s in Nie Mingjue’s tent holding a cup of wine and sitting across from both of them that it occurs to him that this is strange, that the three of them hadn’t really had this type of relationship before and he can’t think of any reason they would have it now.

He puts his cup down, probably with more force than strictly necessary considering the sudden lull in conversation, but he feels uncomfortably like he’s walked into some sort of trap. “What’s going on?”

Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue share a look that speaks of familiarity, of a relationship that’s closer than just comrades. He doesn’t know why it never occurred to him before that the two

of them were *friends*. Probably because whatever friendship had existed before Lan Xichen loudly and publicly defended Jin Guangyao had shattered in the aftermath.

“Jiang Cheng,” Nie Mingjue says, “do you remember when I told you not to make enemies of the Jin Clan?”

“Is this an intervention then?” he demands. There hadn’t been nearly as much backlash against Wei Wuxian’s actions this time around. Partially because Jiang Cheng was condoning them rather than condemning them, and partially because this time around he hadn’t squashed the rumors before they could start, so people knew that Jin Zixuan had been dishonorably rude to A-jie. She’s beloved amongst the camp, as most people aren’t blind to her contributions like Jin Zixuan, and the general consensus seems to be anyone who would be so callous to her deserved a broken rib or two.

Nie Mingjue’s lips quirk up into a smile, which is an expression Jiang Cheng has literally never seen on his face before. “No. I’m thinking that perhaps I should have warned the Jin Clan not to make an enemy of you.”

What the hell is that supposed to mean? He scowls, not sure if it’s a compliment or an insult and not sure how to react in either case.

“What he’s saying,” Lan Xichen says, “is that we haven’t been treating you fairly. You and Jin Zixuan are smart and talented, but you are also young and inexperienced. You are the sect leader of the Jiang, of course, and Jin Zixuan will one day lead the Jin sect, but due to our perception of your abilities and in consideration of the remarkable strain you find yourself under, Nie Mingjue and I have kept each other’s counsel more often than not.”

Jiang Cheng waits a moment to see if he’s going to continue, then when he doesn’t, says, “I know.” He’d known last time too, he’d just been too stressed and busy to be anything but guiltily grateful about the whole thing.

“Well, we’ve decided we haven’t given you enough credit,” Nie Mingjue says. “So this is us. Trying to make up for it. You’re smart, and strong, and a credit to the cultivation world as a whole, and we should treat you accordingly. If we’d listened to you about waiting a few more days, we could have avoided that initial battle entirely.”

He shrugs, uncomfortable, because he doesn’t them thinking too hard one why he’d recommended that, since there’s really no reasoning to back him up that doesn’t involve time travel.

Lan Xichen leans forward until he catches his eye. “Think of it as a type of alliance, if you like. One we shouldn’t have excluded you from to begin with.”

Lan Quiren is acting as the Lan sect leader now, overseeing the rebuilding of Gusu Lan and giving Lan Xichen the opportunity to disappear for long periods of time on reconnaissance missions, something that wouldn’t be acceptable if he were a sect leader. But last time Lan Xichen had taken up the official role of Lan Sect Leader as soon as the war was over, and he can’t think of why that would be any different this time around.



“You don’t have to do this,” he says, even as a pleased flush creeps up the back of his neck. He notices they don’t address the conspicuous absence of Jin Zixuan, in spite of including him in the first part of that little speech.

“No,” Nie Mingjue agrees, “we don’t.”

He looks pointedly at Jiang Cheng’s cup until he picks it back up again, taking a sip mostly to try and hide his smile. Lan Xichen guides the conversation back to their training regimes and what they should keep and abandon once they return to peace time.

The final battle is only a couple of days away and ending the war will create only slightly less problems than it solves, but he doesn’t have to worry about that quite yet, not right at this moment. For now, he sits and drinks with Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue, feeling the slowly growing warmth from a friendship he hadn’t gotten the chance to experience the first time around.

## Chapter End Notes

oh look! plot. there you are.

i hope you liked it!

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# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The morning of the final battle, the clan representatives are all there. Even Wei Wuxian had come to this meeting the last time. He's here this time too, pressed against Jiang Cheng's side. Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji are there of course, and Nie Mingjue has replaced his brother who'd stayed behind in the Unclean Realms with Nie Zonghui, a man Jiang Cheng knew more about from the lectures Nie Huaisang had given him in his time than through anything else. He's not even certain that he'd known his name the first time around.

There is a change from last time, though, and he can only think of it as an improvement. Instead of Jin Zixun by Jin Zixuan's side, it's Mianmian, and if she's a little wide eyed and uncertain at finding herself here, Jiang Cheng doesn't blame her. It's no secret that she and Jin Zixuan are friends, that they're close in a clan that doesn't encourage that sort of thing. Not with the heir to the sect, at any rate, and certainly not from someone like Mianmian, who'd earned her way into the Jin clan through skill and merit and not because she came from any sort of notable background. The Jin, of all people, care about things like that, the appearance of it if not the practicality. It's why Jin Zixun is always by Jin Zixuan's side, even though everyone thinks he's insufferable. He's his cousin, he's part of the main Jin bloodline and not just a disciple, and that matters more than skill or good sense. Wei Wuxian wouldn't have been able to make such a fool out of Mianmian if she'd been his opponent during that banquet, after all, even if he'd wanted to. She's too good for that in a clan that doesn't necessarily reward being good for its own sake.

But Jin Zixun's not here and Mianmian is.

Jin Zixuan has to know the kind of issues this will cause, inside his clan if not outside of it, and Jiang Cheng is pretty sure this isn't something Mianmian would have presumed to ask for. Both because she's never cared for prestige and because she looks vaguely terrified, standing in this room with clan leaders and heirs, when she's always been comfortable if formal around them before.

Nie Mingjue's voice is soft in the near oppressive quiet of the tent, but it's still before dawn and talking any louder seems as if it would break some rule of etiquette none of them have said aloud. Even his brother has been quiet all morning. He can't remember if he was quiet last time too.

Wei Wuxian's eyes are tracing the map intently, his fingers tapping a pattern on Chenqing lightly enough that the sound isn't distracting, overwhelmed by the volume of Nie Mingjue's voice. He's looking over all of it, not just the places that they'll be attacking with the Lan, because he'll need to know later.

Obviously they hadn't known at the time, but Wei Wuxian hadn't just controlled the ferocious corpses around them, but every single one that had been fighting. The Jin had come running to the Palace of the Sun when the fierce corpses had stopped attacking them and

started attaching each other, and then the Nie and all the minor clans had done the same. Wei Wuxian had overcome the power of three pieces of Yin Iron and stole thousands of fierce corpses out of Wen Ruohan's control with a single song.

Jiang Cheng has never feared his brother, not for a moment, but it had been all too easy to understand those who had.

The meeting is just coming to a close when there's a knock at the door and A-jie steps inside. She has dark circles under her eyes and a basket of warm bread on her arm. It's clear she hasn't slept, instead staying up through the night so they could have fresh bread on the morning of the last battle of the war, whether they won it or not.

He knows, just like last time, that kitchen staff is distributing A-jie's bread to everyone else. Last time she'd waited for them back at their rooms to give them their bread and send them off, but this is better, he thinks, watching A-jie smile at Nie Zonghui and press soft bread into his hands.

Everyone here survived this battle the last time. But there's no guarantee they'll manage the same this time, and A-jie's smile and her kindness is as good a send off as any.

Lan Xichen bows his head as he accepts the bread and A-jie grips squeezes Lan Wangji's wrist before moving away. Jiang Cheng thinks that Lan Wangji's face must have softened, just for a moment. He's not sure if A-jie likes Lan Wangji personally or just because of the effect he has on Wei Wuxian. He knows what *he* feels, but A-jie has always been more charitable than him.

Then Mianmian is the one squeezing A-jie's arm, her bright smile clearly trying to be reassuring, but Jiang Cheng's sure it's not just his imagination that everyone in the room is staring, watching A-jie turn to Jin Zixuan, to see what will happen. He'd snap at them to mind their business if it wouldn't embarrass A-jie and if he wasn't so curious himself.

She keeps her head lowered as she holds out the bread to Jin Zixuan, all of her so perfectly, pointedly still that Jiang Cheng knows she's struggling to keep herself from shaking. Wei Wuxian must see it too because he tenses along his side, and Jiang Cheng is pretty sure his hand on his brother's arm is the only thing that keeps him from stomping over to punch that peacock a second time. Possibly also the presence of Mianmian, but considering she'd all but said that if Wei Wuxian punched someone, it was because they deserved it, he kind of doubts it. If Jin Zixuan had brought Mianmian here because he thought having someone Wei Wuxian likes in Jin colors would temper his brother, he'd severely miscalculated.

Jin Zixuan head is raised, but he's looking at a point over A-jie's shoulder that's also conveniently not looking at any of them. "Thank you," he says stiffly, but his fingers graze A-jie's and he looks down at the same time that she looks up, their eyes catching on each other and neither of them quite managing to look away. "Thank you," he repeats, but this time he actually manages to sound like human being. A-jie smiles at him, and it's small enough that he thinks it's real, but it's not like he's the expert on that sort of thing. He hadn't been naïve enough to think *all* his brother's smiles were real, the first time around, but he'd missed a lot of things that he shouldn't have.

He glances over at Wei Wuxian, who rolls his eyes and crosses his arms, but he's not frowning, so he thinks it's probably real. If it wasn't, Wei Wuxian would be a lot angrier right now.

They finish the meeting, the last of it punctuated by chewing, and then disperse to their separate clans.

A-jie is waiting for them, outside, which Jiang Cheng wishes she wouldn't do. There's no reason she couldn't have waited inside with them as they finished up, it's not like anyone would dare kick her out. Lan Wangji hesitates, his gaze lingering on Wei Wuxian a few moments too long for it to be really called a glance, before following his brother over to where the Lan are clustered together.

He and Wei Wuxian bow to A-jie, waiting. She puts a hand over each of their interlaced fists and says, "Come back to me."

"We will," they say together, and then they're breaking, hugging A-jie together before pulling back just enough so they can kiss her cheeks at the same time, like they would do when they were kids whenever she was sad. Usually after their mother had yelled at her.

She laughs just like she always did then, and if it's a little more watery and a little more strained than when they were kids, it not like any of them are going to say anything about it. They're promising they'll return to her.

They're not promising they'll return to her alive.

They're walking over to where the Jiang are assembled and waiting, next to the Lan since they'll be attacking together. They'd all died, last time. There's more of them now, since Jiang Cheng had managed to get them to retreat from the first attack. He hopes those numbers will make some sort of difference. That this time, Wen Ruohan won't wait until they're all dead to send the fierce corpses after them, that he'll send them out at the same time no matter how many living cultivators are waiting for them. Jiang Cheng hopes that he hasn't saved their lives just to watch them die anyway.

"Are you ready?" Wei Wuxian asks, in these few seconds where it's just the two of them, before they get to their clan and have to be something more than they are, have to be Clan Leader Jiang and Senior Brother Wei.

He's lived through this battle before. He's lived through so many more battles after this one, since peace doesn't mean what people think it means, it didn't mean what Jiang Cheng had thought it would mean. It just means that they hadn't not in the middle of war, and there are lots of terrible things that aren't war.

But it matters so much more this time around, he's so much more aware of what this battle means, of what it marks the beginning and end of. So much more aware that if Wei Wuxian can't do what he did last time and win them this war today, they'll be slaughtered. And it'll be his fault.

"No," he says, and Wei Wuxian looks at him in surprise. "I never am."

No matter how much terrible shit the world throws at him, he flinches every time. He never learns and he's never ready.

Wei Wuxian throws an arm around his shoulder, his smile bright and not looking fake at all. "Don't worry Jiang Cheng, I'll protect you!"

That's what he's worried about.

Some of the worst things Wei Wuxian has done have been to protect him.

~

Jiang Cheng had expected the last battle to go the same as it had before.

More than expected. He'd planned for it, trying to do everything he could to ensure what happened before would happen last time. It had been awful, and terrifying, and had led to so many dead amongst the clans.

But they'd won. Against all reason and logic, they'd won, because Wei Wuxian had been there and put his flute to his lips and destroyed the Wen's army. If he doesn't do it again, then there will have been no point to Jiang Cheng coming back to the past, he'll have just made it all worse. As badly as some things had gone, a world where Wen Ruohan reigns over the cultivation clan with three pieces of Yin Iron to do his bidding is a world infinitely more terrible than the one he'd left behind.

Jiang Cheng expects the battle to go the same as before. He'd planned for it. He *needs* it to go the same as before. It's all he can think of as he cuts down Wen after Wen, tossing aside another body to be ready to make a corpse of the next one coming for him.

But at the first note fluttering through the air, he realizes that it's not. That he's changed too much to prevent this from changing too.

Last time, Wei Wuxian hadn't used Chenqing until the end, until it had been clear that there was no other choice. It's unfortunate that everyone but him and the Lan brother that had been on the battlefield had died, because then there could have been some stories of his brother fighting side by side against them on the battlefield to balance out the horrified whispers of his demonic cultivation. Last time, he'd fought without his sword and without his golden core, just his flute to stop a blade and nothing else. Even as their comrades fell all around them, Wei Wuxian kept fighting, kept winning, even with every disadvantage against him. He'd barely even used seals. It's how Jiang Cheng had known Wei Wuxian would be able to beat Jin Zixun without even trying. He'd gone up against the Wen cultivators with no golden core or any sort of cultivation techniques and took them down two and three at a time.

His brother is terrifying in what he's capable of, in ways that have nothing to do with demonic cultivation.

Wei Wuxian fought the same this time around, in the beginning, and Jiang Cheng had quickly lost sight of his brother in the crush of people and Wen warriors. He hadn't worried only because he didn't have the space to worry, too busy doing his best to stay alive, doing his best

to take down as many of the living Wen cultivators as he can. It's too bad that he can't use Zidian here, but the chance of accidentally hitting his own people is too great when they're packed this closely together.

But then Jiang Cheng hears his brother's flute and his first thought is that it's too soon. Not even a quarter their numbers have been killed yet, and obviously he doesn't want all these people to die, especially his own clansmen, but last time Wei Wuxian had waited until it was only the fierce corpses he'd had to defeat, and even that he'd barely managed to come out the victor, to come out alive.

So when he hears Chenqing so soon, before the fierce corpses have been unleashed on the battlefield, panic claws at his throat and the way his limbs lock up and freeze for one too long moment nearly gets him killed, forcing him to roll to the side to avoid a sword coming down on top of his head.

He fights through the crowd, no longer waiting for Wen to come to him, but pushing his way through. He's trying to follow the sound of the flute, but he sees the effects of his brother's cultivation before anything else.

Dark, unnatural clouds form in the air, and that's ominous enough all their own, but when a half dozen ghostly women with painted faces and red robes slip out of the dark smoke, Jiang Cheng has to shove down the bolt of primal fear that wraps itself around his lungs.

The ghosts of women who'd been killed on their wedding day before they could be married. Forever restless, untethered to a family shrine, and so bitter and angry about getting their happiness snatched away from them. Wei Wuxian had explained who the ghost he was using to torture Wen Chao had been, after, and much of Jiang Cheng's unease had come from the angry young bride they were using to enact their revenge rather than the gory and dishonorable nature of that revenge.

Now the sky is bleeding red with those same women, something that hadn't happened last time. Wei Wuxian hadn't struggled to control the ghost with Wen Chao, but that had only been one, and not in the middle of the battlefield, and not when Jiang Cheng needed him to be able to fight thousands fierce corpses right after. He'd been exhausted after they'd finished torturing and killing Wen Chao. None of them can afford for him to be exhausted now.

This is his fault. He should have said something, should have explicitly told Wei Wuxian to wait for the fierce corpses to arrive before using his new cultivation techniques, but he hadn't thought that he'd need to and because of it they're all going to die. What had changed? Why had his brother waited last time and not this time?

Wen cultivators are falling around them, but the screams are from all the clans, everyone terrified of the red cloaked and blood soaked ghosts darting around the battlefield.

He finally catches sight of his brother and for a moment the double vision is so painful that he can't breathe. Wei Wuxian's walking across the battlefield, Chenqing raised to lips, and the Wen soldiers are plenty of things, but they're not *stupid*. They've figured out that his brother is the cause of the horror show going on around them and they're all coming for him,

swords raised and screaming, and all that stands between those gleaming blades and his brother's neck is Lan Wangji.

He doesn't think they planned this. He hopes they didn't plan it, because that means they both kept him out of the loop on purpose, and he'll have to strangle them. But it doesn't matter, because right now Lan Wangji, who last time had managed to make it through the whole battle with his pristine white robes not getting so much as a smudge, has robes streaked in red and the thought that it's probably not his own blood isn't as comforting as it should be.

"Wei Wuxian!" he shouts, cutting down everyone that gets between him and his brother, trying to get to his side as quickly as possible so that Lan Wangji isn't doing this his own, so they can each take one side instead of Lan Wangji spinning around his brother with his Bichen moving almost too quickly for his eyes to track.

The music doesn't falter, but Wei Wuxian's eyes widen when they see him before crinkling at the corners almost like he's smiling.

The bastard has the audacity to *wink* at him. He's going to save his life and then he's going to kill him.

"Wei Wuxian!" he growls once he's close enough. Lan Wangji doesn't acknowledge his presence besides leaving Wei Wuxian's left side completely open, trusting Jiang Cheng to cover it. He does, and the only people coming towards them are the enemy, so he sheathes his sword in the same motion that Zidian comes alive around his wrist. It doesn't kill them right away like sword through the heart would, but the whip can hit several opponents at once and crackles with more than enough energy to do some major damage. By the third hit they don't get back up again. "Wen Ruohan is going to send the fierce corpses here! You need to be able to fight them when they do!"

He can worry about how he's going to explain how he knows that later, when they're all still alive to demand answers from him. It's not too much of a stretch, surely. Wei Wuxian had figured it out last time.

Wei Wuxian inclines his head but doesn't stop playing. If Jiang Cheng didn't think there was a very good possibility that it would free the bride ghosts to wreak havoc on all of them, he'd rip the flute from his brother's hands and beat him with it.

"He knows," Lan Wangji says.

He has to wait to push back another wave of Wen cultivators to turn to glare at Lan Wangji, which ruins the effect a little bit. "What the hell do you mean he knows?"

Apparently what it takes to crack through Lan Wangji's ice cold resolve is battling hundreds of cultivators in order to keep Wei Wuxian from being slaughtered. It must be an age thing, since it had hardly seemed to bother him before, but now Lan Wangji is giving him the bitchiest look he's ever received in both timelines. "I mean that Wei Ying knows."

Jiang Cheng's going to kill him. Wei Wuxian will be devastated, but sacrifices have to be made to preserve his sanity. "Then what the hell is he doing? We can fight off regular cultivators,

but we can't fight off fierce corpses! We need Wei Wuxian for that." The fact that the first time around they'd lost so many people that victory had tasted like defeat isn't the point, and not something either of them know anyway.

If Lan Wangji had been irritated about having to repeat himself the first time, he's downright pissy about it the second time. "Yes. Wei Ying is aware."

Jiang Cheng sees red, and not because he wants to throttle Lan Wangji. One of the bride ghosts is circling them, tearing the opposing cultivators to ribbons as she passes through them. Jiang Cheng curls Zidian back around his wrist with a flick of his hand even as he steps backwards towards his brother, not able to breathe again until he's close enough to dig his elbow into Wei Wuxian's ribs. The way his brother jostles into him rather than away from him probably means Lan Wangji is doing the same on his other side, both of the trying to get as far away from the ghosts and as close to Wei Wuxian as possible.

They're cold. Jiang Cheng had noticed the cold in the room with Wen Chao, but he'd been so angry and Wei Wuxian had been so close and always in between him and the ghost he'd summoned that he hadn't thought of it, but now he doesn't have a choice. It's more than a midnight chill or even deadly winter storm. The ghosts are so cold that they burn with it, sparks of pain going up his arms when she gets too close, until Wei Wuxian notices it and directs her away. Jiang Cheng doesn't feel like he can breathe properly until the last note fades from the air and the bride ghosts along with it as Wei Wuxian lowers his flute. The battlefield is silent, filled with the bodies of the Wen and the horrified faces of the Lan and the Jiang and the members of the minor clans who'd been assigned to join them.

His people, at least, aren't reaching for their weapons. They're all from Yunmeng, many of them having grown up on Lotus Pier but luckily absent on the day of the slaughter. They know Wei Wuxian. They're not going to raise their sword against him, especially not while Jiang Cheng is by his side. Not unless he orders them to, and maybe not even them. No matter what announcements of disownment Jiang Cheng had made the first time around, when he'd left the Burial Mounds with a broken arm, it had taken Wei Wuxian's death and perceived betrayal to get his people to stop calling him Senior Brother Wei.

He's pretty sure they would have, even then, if Jiang Cheng hadn't thrown such a temper tantrum anytime he heard someone mention his brother in the first years after the cliff, after the day both his sister and brother died.

He hadn't known about his brother's lost golden core, when he'd jammed his sword into the cliff face. Even as he'd watched Wei Wuxian fall, shocked that he'd ripped his grip from Lan Wangji's, he hadn't expected it to kill him.

If he'd had his golden core, it wouldn't have, after all.

Even then, Jiang Cheng thinks that maybe the fall only killed him because Wei Wuxian let it. Half dead from being whipped and losing his golden core, he'd been dropped into the Burial Mounds and survived. Why should falling off a cliff have killed him when that didn't?

Did he even try and slow his fall?



Did he bother calling on the ghosts to save him?

Did A-jie's ghost try, reaching for Wei Wuxian like she always did?

When Jiang Cheng went searching at the bottom of the cliff, he'd expected to find his brother hurt but alive.

He hadn't expected to only find a scratched flute and a piece of a bloody robe.

He hadn't expected to never find him at all.

Jiang Cheng can't do it again. Can't handle that grief again. Not like this.

His thoughts are moving sluggishly, like they have this whole battle, but his body isn't.

People are drawing closer, swords raised, and Jiang Cheng doesn't hesitate to push his brother behind him and unsheathe his own sword. If Wei Wuxian died in battle, he told himself he'd be able to live with that, that this is war and he can't control everything. It was a lie, but one he could almost believe.

But he can't even pretend to be okay with the idea of his own side turning on his brother again, of them cutting down Wei Wuxian after he's saved them from a death that Jiang Cheng had been willing to let take them if it meant winning the war.

The Jiang disciples react quickly, moving away from the others and mirroring Jiang Cheng's pose, standing in front of both him and Wei Wuxian, putting themselves between them and all the terrified cultivators.

"Enough!"

Lan Wangji relaxes even as goosebumps ripple across Jiang Cheng's skin. He's never heard Lan Xichen sound angry before. It's not a pleasant sensation, but the Lan are backing down at least, lowering their swords if not sheathing them.

"The Jiang Clan are our allies. What are you doing?" Lan Xichen's voice had softened, something stern and disapproving replacing the hint of simmering rage. Jiang Cheng can't bring himself to mind the difference, not when some of the cultivator's fear has been replaced by shame.

Whatever answer they were going to give in defense of their actions, none of them get a chance to find out.

The crowd of fierce corpses is coming for them, pouring out onto the battlefield just like last time, and it doesn't matter that so many more of them lived to see it this time than last time. They'll die harder, but they'll still die.

Wei Wuxian is still relaxed, or more likely doing a very good impression of being relaxed, twirling his flute easily in his hands. "Don't let anyone come up after me. I have to concentrate."

Then he's off, managing to get to a high enough point where he can oversee the battlefield and where the fierce corpses won't be able to get to him and interrupt his song, so he doesn't know what Wei Wuxian expects Jiang to protect him against.

Swords raise again, but not towards the hundreds of fierce corpses rushing towards them.

Jiang Cheng understands then, with a certainty that makes nausea rise in his throat.

The soft notes of the flute are already piercing the air, the fierce corpses faltering. There are so many more people to distract the fierce corpses this time around than before that he doesn't bother, keeping his focus on his brother as their enemies turn on each other instead of attacking them.

He thinks that Wei Wuxian could have done this last time. Could have called the bride ghosts to save their army and still gotten up there and made the fierce corpses destroy each other. Jiang Cheng thinks he didn't because he thought he'd be dead before he could play the first note.

His brother can't fight and play at the same time. He'd needed Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng at his side to defend him as he walked across the battlefield, and they wouldn't have done that the last time, not with how little they understood about his cultivation technique. They wouldn't have stood by and let him *die*, obviously, but they would have ripped the flute from his hands and shouted about helping them fight.

Or maybe they wouldn't have, if they'd figured out what he was doing quickly enough. But then everyone would have been attacking them instead, and last time the Jiang were in a much more tenuous position, last time Jiang Cheng had been holding onto his sanity by a thread. Wei Wuxian never would have expected Lan Wangji or Jiang Cheng to defend him against everyone on all sides, even though they *would have*, even the first time around, when everything was awful and they didn't understand shit about what was going on.

Two fierce corpses break through a throng of Jiang cultivators to attack him and Jiang Cheng raises his sword. Even as he fights them, going from barely keeping his head attached to beating them back when a Lan cultivator he doesn't recognize steps in to help, he can't stop thinking.

Wei Wuxian's comment just now keeps echoing in his skull. Fierce corpse can't get to Wei Wuxian when he's that high off the ground. The only people that can are other cultivators, but all their living enemies are dead. Which means he's worried about being attacked by their own people – well hopefully not *their* own people, not anyone from Yunmeng – but people who are supposed to be watching their backs rather than stabbing them. After seeing how quick everyone was to turn on Wei Wuxian when he'd just saved all their lives, he can't even say it's an unreasonable fear.

Wei Wuxian couldn't save them last time without being stopped. And he couldn't have defeated the fierce corpses without being attacked, possibly killed, and definitely starting another war. The first time he'd lived through this, he'd tried not to be his mother's son, tried to hide his temper under diplomacy. But if they'd tried to kill Wei Wuxian, if they'd

*succeeded*, Jiang Cheng would have burned so hot at the betrayal that he would have burned whatever meager bridges he'd managed to build with the other clans along with it.

It won't happen this time. Lan Xichen had spoken up for them, and Jiang Cheng already knows the depth of fear people are capable of when it comes to his brother. Even still, Zidian sparks angrily on his wrist. But the point of all this is to keep everything from going to shit, not make it worse in a new, different way.

The two fierce corpses in front of him attack each other instead him and the Lan. She says something to him, but he can't hear her really, something about asking him if he's okay and he nods. She doesn't look convinced, but there are still fierce corpses to fight, so she leaves his side and doesn't ask any more questions.

So much of his brother's behavior after the war makes sense now. He can't help but wonder if that will change too.

Wei Wuxian hadn't been able to save their people, hadn't been able to protect the people who called him Senior Brother Wei, hadn't been able to save his own clansmen or the Lan cultivators, the people who belonged to the sect of the man he loved. Instead he'd been forced to fight at their side, swordless and with no golden core, watching all these people all die around him. The whole time knowing he was capable of saving them, but unable to do it, because if he tried then they'd turn against him, they'd kill him, and then he wouldn't be there to stop the fierce corpses, and the Wens would win the war.

His brother had known, from at least the moment he'd interrupted that war meeting the first time and said not to worry about the Yin Iron, that he was necessary to end the war. That he was the only one able to stop the fierce corpses.

So he'd done the first time what Jiang Cheng had been prepared to do this time. Watched his fellow cultivators die because he'd known saving them would get him killed and lose them the war.

Jiang Cheng had thought Wei Wuxian's drinking and behavior after the war had been a form of self medication, at the time for the months of untreated trauma and later for losing his golden core, but he thinks maybe it was this. Filled with shame at not choosing to die save them, even if it lost them the war, and overwhelmed with a terrible guilt at his inability to save everyone, even though the only reason he hadn't been able to is that they would have killed him for it.

No wonder Wei Wuxian had drank so much. No wonder he'd been so miserable and awful. His brother can stand anything but guilt, but feeling like he's failed those that are depending on him.

If they manage to survive this, maybe he'll be a little less terrible this time around. Or maybe Jiang Cheng's completely off the mark and dealing with round two of Wei Wuxian's trauma hitting him all at once will leave him feeling somewhere in the range of helpless as dealing with Jin Ling's toddler temper tantrums had.

The first person to gather enough foolish bravery to make a move towards Wei Wuxian is a Yao cultivator. Of course.

Jiang Cheng's sword is at her throat before he thinks better of it. He probably doesn't need to escalate it quite to this point yet, but the fierce corpses are already mostly taken care of, fighting each other instead of fighting them. Which means there are plenty of unfriendly eyes on his brother, plenty of unfriendly eyes on him, and hopefully this way he won't have to repeat himself. "Don't."

"Can't you see what he's doing?" she asks furiously. "He's a monster!"

Words are not actions. He can't kill her for running her mouth. "Don't worry. If you won't listen to me, you won't have to explain to your clan leader why you've made enemies out of the Jiang Sect. I'll slit your throat and deliver your head as explanation."

The first time around he would have thought these words but he never would have said them, too afraid of starting another conflict based on them alone. He doesn't worry about that now. Clan Leader Yao is a coward at his core and Jiang Cheng will only knock the cultivator out unless she's really determined to harm his brother. Nothing to start a war over.

Not that anyone who's listening to them needs to know that, of course.

She pales and stumbles back away from him. Several more people move forward, their faces twisted in anger and betrayal, and Zidian snaps down in front of them, blocking them.

A Lan cultivator steps on his sword, clearly meaning to fly past Jiang Cheng towards Wei Wuxian, and Zidian curls around the edge of his sword and yanks it out from underneath him and flinging it far out of his reach. The Lan falls with a crunch that means something definitely broke at the impact, but he's still breathing, so he should count himself lucky.

Jiang Cheng doesn't want to kill anyone besides the Wen today.

But if that's what it takes to protect his brother, then he will.

"Wei Ying!"

Jiang Cheng barely registers all the fierce corpses collapsing, the facsimile of life leaving their bodies. He's too focused on turning around to see Wen Ruohan with his hand on Wei Wuxian's throat.

This part, at least, is the same.

Jin Guangyao – currently Meng Yao, but not for long – thrusts a sword through Wen Ruohan's chest, pulling it out with a look of faint horror. Considering this far from the first person he's killed, Jiang Cheng assumes it's fake. Or maybe it's not. He's always been uncomfortable with getting his hands dirty, after all.

Lan Wangji reaches Wei Wuxian's side just in time to prevent him from cracking his head open on the stone steps of the Palace of Sun and Flames. Jiang Cheng aches to do what he did last time as soon as he'd figured out that the fierce corpse weren't going to spring to life once

more, to go running to both of them and frantically press his fingers to his brother's neck to make sure he's alive, but he can't.

There are still people who look like they want Wei Wuxian's blood, even with the war so obviously won, and won *because* of him. He has to stay here, has to stand between them.

The Jin pour onto the field just like last time, but instead of leading them into a cheer, Jin Zixuan forces his way to Jiang Cheng's side, Jin Zixun and Mianmian a half step behind him.

He's so relieved that the father to his future nephew is still alive to give him said nephew that Jiang Cheng reacts without thinking, clapping a hand on Jin Zixuan's shoulder even as he forces a smile for Mianmian and says, "Glad you're not dead," speaking to both of them.

He pretends Jin Zixun isn't here. It's a bit of pity he's not dead, although not all hope is lost, of course. Maybe he'll slip on some blood and crack *his* head open.

Jin Zixuan tenses under his hand before relaxing, his lips tilting up at the corners just enough that it might count as a smile before his mouth returns to a grim line. "What's going on?"

"Found your brother," he says, gesturing behind him to Jin Guangyao. He's too exhausted to even try not being an asshole. The look Jin Zixuan gives him in return, all twitching eyebrows and narrowed eyes, is so huffy and ridiculous that for a moment he has to choke down the urge to laugh.

"Wei Wuxian!" Mianmian cries, taking a few steps toward the palace before hesitating, looking back at Jin Zixuan and retracing her steps back to his side. Jin Zixun's lip curls into a sneer, but Jin Zixuan acts like he hasn't even noticed her misstep. He's not a bastard all the time, apparently. Not that he understands what A-jie sees in him.

Lan Wangji is holding Wei Wuxian against his chest in a bridal carry, his brother's head against Lan Wangji's shoulder. He assumes his brother's still alive based on Lan Wangji's face. He's seen what Lan Wangji looks like after watching Wei Wuxian die, and this isn't it.

Jiang Cheng had thought he'd been so dramatic, at the time, sure that his brother was still alive at the bottom of the cliffs.

He meets Lan Wangji's eyes and gives a curt nod that he returns before somehow managing to unsheathe Bichen and step onto it, carrying Wei Wuxian back to the camp.

He wants to follow them. He doesn't.

"Go get Nie Mingjue," he says to Lan Xichen, who for some reason has been watching *him* instead of going to Jin Guangyao. "Jin Zixuan and I will handle the clean up."

He hadn't thought of it last time, too worried about his brother. It had just been one more thing he'd left for Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue to handle, even though the latter had been something close to half dead at the time. He's not going to make that mistake a second time.

Lan Xichen shakes his head, and for a confusing moment Jiang Cheng thinks he's telling him no before he raises his voice, not really in volume but in – something, making it so his voice

carries around the battlefield. “Lan. You are under Sect Leader Jiang’s command.”

There are so many rebelliously pissed of faces, for Lan, but no one says anything. If Lan Xichen wasn’t so clearly exhausted, Jiang Cheng thinks the way his eyes crinkle in the corners might be a sign of amusement.

Ah, right, he had just threatened to kill them if they crossed him. But Wei Wuxian is gone, carried away in the tender arms of their precious Hanguang Jun, so he doesn’t know what they have to complain about, really. They can’t hurt his brother if he’s not here, and if they’re not going to hurt his brother then he’s not going to hurt them.

“Start gathering the bodies!” he shouts. “We’ll build a pyre.”

A funeral fire with cultivator bodies is dangerous and will need to be carefully contained. It’s why they’d used to bury cultivators before they’d figured out that was actually the worse option.

The Jiang cultivators do as he says immediately, shoulder checking the Lans until they do the same. The Jin stay perfectly still, glancing between him and Jin Zixuan. Jin Zixun opens his mouth, presumably to say something that will make Jiang Cheng want to punch him, but Mianmian yawns, raising her hands in the air so she elbows Jin Zixun in the face, and then he’s yelling at her while she simpers an apology she clearly doesn’t mean. Jiang Cheng has to bite his lower lip to keep from doing something he shouldn’t.

Jin Zixuan’s eyes are bright with the same laughter Jiang Chen won’t let escape. He likes who Jin Zixuan is around Mianmian a lot more than how he is around Jin Zixun. He’s pretty sure the only reason Jin Zixuan hadn’t made a *complete* ass of himself at Cloud Recesses had been Mianmian playing interference for him constantly.

“Gather the bodies,” Jin Zixuan says, doing the same thing with his voice that isn’t quite shouting. Once the Jin start moving he leans in closer to ask, voice low, “You’re sure the infection isn’t still spreading?”

“It wasn’t an infection,” he answers. “Well, not exactly like one, it was – actually, you know what, I don’t understand it enough to explain it. They were being manipulated by the Yin Iron and now that’s not an issue, so.”

“They could be manipulated again,” he says simply.

Jiang Cheng doesn’t reach for his sword, which he thinks is very mature and responsible of him. “Wei Wuxian wouldn’t do that.”

Even when he’d been mad with grief and prepared to maim or kill everyone not in Jiang purple, he hadn’t done that, hadn’t turned them into fierce corpses against each other and forced them to relive their nightmares afresh, even though that’s what they’d forced of him. To be helpless while people he cared about died to prevent another war.

“Who said anything about your brother?” Jin Zixuan asks dryly. “If Wen Ruohan could manage it, so could someone else.”

That's a good point.

Especially since that's exactly what had happened last time.

It's a strange, tender thought that if Jin Zixuan hadn't died in that valley, maybe he would have figured it out, maybe it would have been his obnoxious, irritating brother-in-law who didn't immediately blame Wei Wuxian for everything, who managed to find the truth.

Not that it matters. Jin Zixuan isn't dying in any valleys this time around, and Jiang Cheng already knows who to blame if he hears a second flute over his brother's.

"If you've got open wounds, cover them before touching the dead!" he yells, ignoring Jin Zixuan's wince at how it's kind of right in his ear.

If he every stopped yelling and tried that weird voice Jin Zixuan and Lan Xichen use, his people would start checking him for head injuries. Nie Mingjue yells too, so it's perfectly acceptable clan leader thing to do, he doesn't need this face from any of them.

He sighs, shoving Sandu into his belt and pushing his sleeves up to his elbows. "Come on. This will go faster if we help."

He can tell Jin Zixuan wants to refuse, but with him already leaning over to haul a Wen corpse over his shoulder, there's no way for Jin Zixuan to get out of helping him without looking like an ass. Not that that's always stopped him before, of course, but he only sighs before following Jiang Cheng's lead.

Handling the dead bodies of his people doesn't get easier, exactly, but he's learned to distance himself from it enough not to break down over it, to do what needs to be done and deal with whatever unpleasant emotions remain after. He'd thought as a teenager that nothing could hurt as much as watching the slaughter at Lotus Pier, but he'd been a fool. Watching his people die hurts that much every time, regardless of the circumstances.

His mind wanders as he works. His mind's *been* wandering all damn day, he's lucky it hadn't gotten him killed. He and the Nie Huaisang of his original timeline had talked about what to do about Jin Guangyao at length. He'd honestly expected Nie Huaisang to ask him to kill him and be done with it. The problem with doing that, of course, is that he hadn't actually done anything that terrible yet, so no one would understand it, and it would end up just being one more reason for everyone to turn against the Jiang Clan. He'd been pretty sure he could kill him without getting caught, but Nie Huaisang had come up with a different solution to the problem. It, predictably, involves shoving Wei Wuxian in the middle of a mess with the hope that he'll fix it.

The effectiveness of this particular tactic is probably why Nie Huaisang had employed it so often.

But that's for later, weeks down the line. For right now, all he has to focus on is burning the dead, and doing it quickly.

The sooner the dead are taken care of, the sooner they can return to camp.

The sooner he can check on his brother.

~

It's something closer to dawn than he's entirely comfortable with by the time the last of funeral pyres are lit. He's almost tempted to stay and wait for the bodies to be burned away and the flames tamped down, but several of his cultivators look like they're debating if they can get away with telling him something he doesn't want to hear, probably to leave.

He recognizes those looks from both timelines, from his whole life, practically. Too high in rank to just be told to fuck off and too temperamental to take kind words as they're intended. As a kid, it was always A-jie or Wei Wuxian they sent after him, his brother more often than not. Jiang Cheng would try to shove his anger down around A-jie, but sometimes Wei Wuxian could goad him into being properly mad, and he'd always felt better, after.

But even in this timeline, right now, A-jie is back at the camp and Wei Wuxian is unconscious, so his people have to figure out how willing they are to get yelled at for the grave offence of being concerned about their clean leader.

He wouldn't have survived everything last time without them, truly.

"I'll stay until it's done."

He turns, and for a moment Mianmian looks more like a Wen than a Jin, her pale gold clothes stained red and grey. It's the blood from all the bodies they'd moved and ash from them burning.

Mianmian has never had any problems with getting her hands dirty.

"You should leave," he says to her. "Get some rest, it's been a long day."

The exasperated look on her face is such a perfect copy of the one Wei Wuxian has given him a thousand times that he almost wonders if he taught it to her specifically. "I know you're worried about the fire getting out of control, but it won't, and I'll stay to make sure it won't. Your people are already burned, it's just the Wen left. There's no reason for you to stay."

"A clan leader should be here," he says, although he really can't think of as to why.

Her eyes narrow. She goes into a low, formal bow and says, "Clan Leader Jiang, if you don't go back to camp and get some rest, I'll drag you there myself and it will be embarrassing for the both us."

The sound of laughter is so unexpected and out of place that it takes him a long second to realize it's coming from him, but Mianmian's smiling at him so he can't bring himself to mind too much. "Do you speak to Jin Zixuan like that?"

"Yes," she says, honest and unrepentant.

It's probably the only thing that's kept him from turning out like Jin Zixun.



“You’ll send someone if you need help?” he asks, even though it’s a stupid question, because of course she will.

Mianmian doesn’t even roll her eyes at him. If she didn’t have an endless well of patience, she wouldn’t survive being Jin Zixuan’s friend, after all. “Yes. I promise.”

He nods, claps her on the shoulder, and unsheathes Sandu so he can ride his sword back to camp.

He’s hoping the cool night air on his face will clear his head, but it doesn’t, and by the time he touches down back in camp he can’t tell if he wants to fall face first into his bed or head back and watch the last of the bodies burn.

“A-Cheng! A-Cheng!”

A-jie’s voice sounds far away, and there’s no reason for her to be awake right now anyway, so it still manages to surprise him when he sees her running towards him, rapidly closing the distance between them.

He puts his hands up and takes several steps back, panic jolting through the fog in his head. “A-jie, stop!”

She does, thankfully, a dozen feet away and still too close. She’s pale with deep bruises under eyes and he knows that the blood streaked across her sleeves can’t be hers, but it still makes his stomach lurch. “A-Cheng?”

“You don’t want to touch me,” he says, “I’m all,” he gestures to himself when he can’t think of the words. He’s covered in sweat and dirt and blood and ash, the smell of burning flesh baked into his clothes, his hair, possibly his very skin.

She scoffs, a sound he doesn’t hear from her often, and then she’s walking towards him again. He backs away because he can’t stand the idea of his sister touching him like this. He knows she’s seen worse, touched worse thanks to her time spent assisting the medics, but it doesn’t matter.

A-jie moves quicker than he thought she could, grabbing his hand and holding it in between her own, small and soft and already streaked grey just from touching him. “I don’t care,” she says firmly. “But if you want to clean up first, fine. Let’s go.”

It should be embarrassing, maybe, the way A-jie stripes him down to his underrobe and dumps bucket after bucket of water on him until the water runs clear, until there’s no more blood congealing in his hair, but he’s too numb to really care. He’ll be embarrassed later, maybe, but for now he scrubs himself down and pulls away every time A-jie tries to help, every time she tries to get too close, and she sighs but doesn’t push.

“Get changed,” she says softly, herding him towards his rooms still dripping wet but mostly clean. Once he’s in his own room he considers keeping the door closed and waiting there until A-jie goes back to her own room, but he knows she won’t. He’ll wake in the morning to her having slept outside his door, and then he’ll be the terrible little brother who made his

elder sister sleep outside because he was too stubborn. He strips off the last of his clothes, scrubbing the few places he hadn't gotten clean, and slips into soft pants and a clean underrobe, not able to bring himself to do anything more elaborate and formal than that. He flings his hair over his shoulder, his fingers too stiff to even try doing anything with it.

He opens the door and A-jie is still there, waiting. She smiles and reaches for him and he doesn't move away, but he must flinch or tense or have some other subtle tell, because she pulls back. She's always been able to read him in a way no one else can, and he hardly feels very subtle right now. Her smile doesn't change, but he knows he's hurting her, that he's being an asshole for no reason. He's clean, isn't he? She's his sister and she loves him, what's his problem?

She leads him away and he follows, because what else is he supposed to do. She takes him to Wei Wuxian's room, pausing outside the door. "It's okay. Thank you for watching over him."

He doesn't understand until he sees a flicker of movement on the roof and he steps in front of A-jie, cursing himself for leaving his sword in his room. Thankfully Zidian is still on his wrist.

But it's just Lan Wangji stepping into the moonlight, eyes wide as he gracefully jumps down from the roof and lands in front of him. "How did you," he starts, then cuts himself off. Apparently he'd thought that A-jie hadn't known he was there. Which is a fair assumption, since Jiang Cheng hadn't even noticed he was there.

He's cleaned himself up since Jiang Cheng saw him carrying Wei Wuxian away, as perfect as always down to his stupidly elaborate hair ornament. He can't bring himself to give a shit about his own state of disarray.

A-jie starts to go into a deep bow, but this time she doesn't make it very far before Lan Wangji presses up against her forearms, stopping her from going any deeper. "Please don't," he says, voice low. "I have done nothing worthy of it."

"You don't get to decide what other people feel about you," she says kindly. She moves quickly again, grabbing both of Lan Wangji's hands in her own. If Wei Wuxian had done that to him, he'd be flushed with panic, but instead he just tenses. He obviously wants to pull his hands back, but doesn't, and when A-jie does nothing more than hold his hands, the tension drains away. She waits for him to relax before she says, "Thank you for caring about A-Xian and for protecting him."

Lan Wangji looks so lost that Jiang Cheng is reminded all over again how young he is, how young they all are. Battle after battle he faces down with the same impenetrable icy exterior, but one genuine moment of gratitude and it cracks. "You don't have to thank me for that," he says eventually.

A-jie squeezes his hands before letting go. "But I will, all the same."

He looks towards him, as if Jiang Cheng will be able to explain his sister, but he can't manage more than raising an eyebrow. Lan Wangji turns back to A-jie and murmurs, "Lady Jiang," before nodding at him and heading back to the Lan section of the Unclean Realms.

A-jie pushes open the door to Wei Wuxian's room and steps inside. He can see through the open door that candles are already lit, and Lan Wangji had been on the roof, so he can only assume that this is where A-jie had been before she came to meet him. The sentries must have told her that he was arriving. She must have asked the sentries to tell her when he was arriving.

"A-Cheng," she says. He shouldn't keep his older sister waiting. He steps into the room, barely noticing as A-jie shuts the door behind him, and he means to stay there, pressed against the wall, but now that he's here his legs carry him forward without his permission.

Wei Wuxian is dead.

It's the first and only thing he can think, but then he sees the shallow rise and fall of his brother's chest, which might be there or just might be his mind playing tricks on him. He doesn't remember getting to his knees or leaning forward, but the next thing he knows he's braced over his brother, holding his hand in front of Wei Wuxian's mouth, not able to take a breathe himself until he feels the soft rush of air over his fingers as his brother exhales.

"Oh, no, A-Cheng, I'm sorry." A-jie is next to him, her hands hovering over his shoulders but not touching. "I should have warned you, I wasn't thinking – he's alive. A-Xian's alive."

He doesn't look it, paler than he's ever seen him and his eyes sunken into his face, his lips bloodless and chapped.

He looks worse than he had the last time.

All of this is worse than it was the last time.

It should be easier, not harder, but it's not. He's been terrified all day, pushing it down because there was no room for it, but it's more than just today. Ever since he came back, he's known this was the most important day, that if he fucked everything up then they'd lose the war and he'd have damned who knows how many people to a miserable life and painful death under the Wen, all because he thought he could fix something, all because he'd been arrogant enough to think that he could touch something and not ruin it, that he could stop his legacy from being *too little, too late, and not fucking good enough*.

A-jie pulls him against her and he doesn't realize he's crying until he's struggling to muffle his sobs into her shoulder. She's damp from helping clean him and the smell of blood and death is still clinging to her clothes, but he doesn't care. He hadn't wanted her to touch him earlier, sure it would shatter him. Which had been stupid, because of course she's keeping him together, not pulling him apart.

He didn't ruin it. Wei Wuxian still won the war for them, saving so many of the people that Jiang Cheng had been prepared to let die, and if his brother looks fucking awful, he's not dead yet, and he's not going to die if Jiang Cheng has anything to say about it.

But it's too much, the relief and the grief and all the regrets and what ifs tangling in his chest until he's left shaking, until all he can do is press his ear to his sister's chest to listen for the strong, steady beat of her heart. He flings out a hand, grasping Wei Wuxian's wrist tight

enough to bruise. He focuses on the fluttering pulse beneath his fingers and not on the icy coldness of his brother's skin.

A-jie presses a kiss to the top of his head, gripping him with all the strength she has. "It's okay, A-Cheng, it's all okay. The war is over and we're alive. A-Xian and I are alive, it's okay."

His sister is alive.

His brother is alive.

He hasn't ruined everything.

Jiang Cheng nods against A-jie's shoulder, his sobs slowing to shuddering breathes.

The first rays of the morning sun are just starting to peek through the window when he and A-jie finally manage to fall asleep, both of them half slumped onto Wei Wuxian's bed and A-jie's hand tangled in his.

## Chapter End Notes

i hadn't meant for the final battle to take up a whole chapter

ah well

feelings, anyone? can i offer you some feels in this trying time??

i hope you liked it!

feel free to follow / harass me at: [shanastoryteller.tumblr.com](https://shanastoryteller.tumblr.com)

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jiang Cheng is awake and on his feet in the same moment, Zidian sparking in his hands before he's even opened his eyes. He's not sure what's woken him until he blinks a couple of times and sees Lan Xichen standing in front of him, his hands raised in front of his chest instead of gripping his sword like any reasonable person would be doing with Zidian poised to cut them down. "Fuck," he says, curling Zidian back into a bracelet with a flick of his wrist. "I – sorry, shit."

"It's alright," Lan Xichen says soothingly.

The glare he throws the eldest Lan brother's way has made disciples cry, but his smile just deepens a little more. "I could have killed you. You didn't even reach for your sword."

"It takes more than a strike from a whip to kill me, Sect Leader Jiang," he says, and Jiang Cheng resists the urge to point out not if he'd wrapped it around his fool neck. "How is he?"

He turns around so quickly he'd have lost his balance if he was anyone else, everything coming back to him in a flood of memories and emotions. Not that he'd forgotten, exactly, but remembering it doesn't hurt any less. Wei Wuxian's chest is still rising and falling. He looks even worse in the harsh light of day, truly more like the fierce corpses he'd fought, and Jiang Cheng's fingers twitch with the urge to check his pulse, to see if it's gotten any stronger in the past couple of hours.

"He's still breathing," he says, which is about the best that can be said for him right now. He goes to run a hand through his hair and it gets stuck partway through and has to yank it out, confused. He pulls his hair over his shoulder and instead of being a tangled mess it's neatly braided down his back.

A-jie must have done it before she'd left, sitting behind him as he slept and plaiting his hair together like she used to do for him as a child. The wave of fondness hits him with such strength that he has to swallow to get rid of the lump in his throat and pricking behind his eyes.

"Wangji is worried," Lan Xichen says, his voice low, as if it's a secret.

"About him dying or about him being evil?" he asks. He thinks he knows the answer, but he has to ask.

Lan Xichen just sighs, giving him one of those soft, patient looks that makes Jiang Cheng want to strangle him a little bit on principal alone. It's annoying because on anyone else's face it would be patronizing, but Lan Xichen is possibly the least patronizing person he's ever met. "Wangji is concerned about the mental toll this new cultivation toll takes on Young

Master Wei,” he says, “but I believe his immediate concern is Young Master Wei’s physical recovery.”

“Did he actually articulate any of that or are you just extrapolating based on the severity of his frowns?” That seems like a lot of things that Lan Wangji wouldn’t admit out loud, but also it’s not like Jiang Cheng has ever been one of the people that Lan Wangji would admit these kind of things to, so he wouldn’t know either way.

“He does talk to people,” Lan Xichen says, a touch defensive.

Jiang Cheng raises an eyebrow but doesn’t say anything further, since pissing off Lan Xichen isn’t exactly on his to do list. But he’s pretty sure a good chunk of the bullshit that had happened the first time around had occurred because Lan Wangji is tragically inept at vocalizing any of his emotions and Wei Wuxian won’t believe someone cares about him without years of evidence and then words to back it up. Wei Wuxian had doubted him and A-jie, of all people. Although, to be fair to Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian had misunderstood what little Lan Wangji has said to him and taken it as some sort of personal attack. Wei Wuxian’s skill in believing the best and the worst of people at the exact same time would be impressive if it wasn’t so frustrating.

Lan Xichen presses his lips together, but it’s in amusement rather than anger. “You seem to do a fine enough job understanding him.”

“I just watch my brother’s face and guess from there,” he says, reflexively looking back at the bed and unable to keep from wincing at how terrible he looks. When he turns back, Lan Xichen’s face is creased in worry. It’s so strange. The Lan brothers look so alike, but they couldn’t be more different. Lan Xichen wears all his emotions on his sleeves, his face expressive and open, and Jiang Cheng has never had reason to believe it’s anything but genuine. It’s utterly baffling. He doesn’t know anyone that open with their own emotions, and he can’t imagine being that way himself. He needs to change the subject from Wei Wuxian. Talking about how his brother looks like he might take his last breath at any moment won’t heal him any faster. “How’s Nie Mingjue?”

Lan Xichen sighs, a sound of fondness and exasperation that reminds him of A-jie. “Injured. He keeps trying to argue the healers into letting him out of bed. They’re Lan healers, which is the only reason they haven’t given in to him yet, but there’s only so much I can ask of my own people. Keeping Nie Mingjue someplace he doesn’t want to be might be beyond even their capabilities.”

“Have you tried sending in Nie Huaisang?” he asks. “If he’ll rest for anyone, it’ll be him.”

“How do you think I got him to go to the healers in the first place?” he asks dryly. “But I fear even his little brother’s pleading will only keep him in bed for a day. If we’re lucky.”

“I’ll send A-jie to check in on him,” he says before he can think better of it.

He’s not sure what to make of Lan Xichen’s surprise. “You want to send her to him, knowing how temperamental and quick to lash out he is when he’s frustrated and injured?”

“She’s *my* sister,” he points out. “Do you really think Nie Mingjue will be her first experience with temperamental and easily frustrated clan leaders?” The smile that pulls from Lan Xichen is a little bit too large to be fake. He tries to return it, but can’t quite manage it. He jerks his head to his brother. “Any chance I can borrow one of those healers to check on my brother? I know A-jie already had someone check him over, but.”

“Of course,” Lan Xichen says quickly. “Wangji wants to play for him too, if you’ll allow it. He thinks it’ll help.”

“Sure,” he says, hoping he’s not too obviously relieved at the offer. Lan Wangji’s playing had helped so much last time, and Wei Wuxian needs that help now more than ever. He gives in, doing what he’d wanted to do when he first woke up, and leans down to grab his brother’s wrist, feeling for his pulse. It doesn’t feel any better than it had last night, but it doesn’t feel any worse either.

“Alright,” he says, gently laying his brother’s hand on his chest. “Let’s get going.”

“Going,” Lan Xichen echoes, his eyebrows pushed together.

Jiang Cheng gestures to the door. “Nie Mingjue is out of commission, at least for a day but for more if we’re lucky. There’s still more to do. Let’s go.” He pauses. “We should probably stop at my rooms so I can get changed first.”

“No, you don’t have to,” Lan Xichen starts then cuts himself off. “I know you’re worried about your brother.”

“When aren’t I?” he asks frankly. “Wei Wuxian being injured doesn’t make the realities of war go away. We need to continue the clean up from the battle. Mianmian should have finished taking care of the bodies that were outside of the Sun Palace, but that’s not the only place battles were fought and it’s not the only place bodies need to be taken care of. Figuring out how Nie Mingjue wants to lay claim to the reminder of the Wen territory will have to wait, I suppose.”

It’s not what had happened last time, of course, the Wen land had been parceled out to clans who couldn’t control it and then had been scorched rather than maintained. A waste on every level, and he’d thought so the first time around, but hadn’t been able to say it, too busy drowning under all the responsibilities that he could barely comprehend, never mind handle.

He’s not going to drown this time. If it’s all just as hard the second time around, fine, at least this time he knows what he’s doing.

“We should wait for Sect Leader Jin. He’s on his way and should be here tomorrow,” he says, his face politely neutral which is as close as he gets to scowling.

Jiang Cheng has no problem with scowling for the both of them. “How magnanimous of him. Well, until he deigns to show up, there’s no reason we can’t get a head start of everything.” A thought occurs to him and he has the decency to feel a little guilty. It’s possible that Lan Xichen wants to wait for Jin Guangshan not out of deference or respect, but because he’s been running himself ragged during this war and needs a break. “You can rest, if you want.

It's fine. I can handle coordinating the rest of cremations and clean up from the battlefield. A-jie's already coordinating the medics and the injured, so you don't need to worry about that."

Lan Xichen almost looks like he's going to say something, but just shakes his head. "No. I'll accompany you, if you're sure."

"I'm sure," he says, and pointedly doesn't look back at his brother before stepping out of his room.

He's thrown by the presence of two of his cultivators standing on either side of the door, swords in their hands. They'd been dead by now last time around, but this time they're here and alive and for some reason lingering outside of his brother's room. "Wang Yan. Li Jun. Is something wrong?" Lan Xichen's face twitches, but barely, so Jiang Cheng decides to ignore it. The Jiang Clan is the only one that doesn't require cultivators to relinquish their family names when they join the sect. The other clans tend to have a lot of opinions about that, but they know better by now than to say anything about it.

If someone needs a name change to feel as if they belong to a clan, then that sounds like a pretty shitty clan, in his opinion. Not that he says that. The Jiang clan can keep their opinions to themselves too. Sometimes.

Wang Yan's delicate face is marred by a nasty gash down her cheek, but it's already been cleaned and bandaged so he doesn't bother to bring it up. She's one of the most impressive cultivators in his clan, and with a strong application of her golden core she'll be healed by tomorrow morning. Li Jun isn't the strongest cultivator, but he is the strongest fighter, his shoulders thick with muscle and taller by a head than most people.

They glance at each other before looking back at him. His eyes narrow. "Keeping secrets from your clan leader?"

Li Jun seems scandalized at the suggestion. "You have a very suspicious mind, Sect Leader Jiang."

Not suspicious enough. "Why are you out here? Were you waiting for me?" He eyes their weapons and the way they're holding themselves. "Are you expecting trouble?"

Li Jun's lips press together and it's Wang Yan who says, "People are talking. We already discussed it with Lady Jiang and she approved."

He gives them another second in case they decide to make sense all on their own. "Approved what?" he snaps when it becomes clear that neither of them are going to say anything.

"Two Jiang cultivators are to be stationed outside of Wei Wuxian's room at all times until he awakens," Li Jun says.

He blinks, taken aback. "Why? We're in the Unclean Realms!"

"Yes," Li Jun says, voice heavy. "People are talking."



It takes him longer than it should to finally understand what they're saying and the rage courses through him so quickly that for a moment his vision goes white.

He'd known that leaving more people alive would give them more enemies than allies. But he hadn't thought anyone would be stupid enough to come after his brother here, when he's injured and unable to defend himself. No one had tried last time, but last time so few people had been left who'd witnessed Wei Wuxian's terrifying feats, last time he hasn't slaughtered the Wens with a half dozen bride ghosts.

"If anyone tries, you cut them down," he says, barely recognizing his voice. "You don't disarm. You don't incapacitate. You kill them where they stand." If they're trying it now, they've had time to think about it, to plan to do it. It's not blind fear and panic, not something excusable like being in the middle of the battlefield with adrenaline running high. They've seen Wei Wuxian save their lives, seen him win the war, seen the condition it left him in, and decided that his brother deserves death for it.

"As we said," Wang Yan's expression would seem bland to those that don't know her, "Lady Jiang already gave the orders. No need to repeat them, Sect Leader Jiang."

Lan Xichen takes in a soft breath beside him, not quite a gasp, as if he can't imagine the timid Lady Jiang giving such orders, but Jiang Cheng can't bring himself to be anything more than grimly satisfied. It's almost funny, how everyone always thinks it's idealistic Wei Wuxian who's the ruthless one, who's the one they have to watch out for.

As if he and A-jie aren't Madame Yu's children.

As if the cruelest parts of all three of them don't come one when the other two are threatened.

"Good," he says simply. "Coming, Lan Xichen?"

He walks away and a moment later Lan Xichen joins him. His voice is quiet when he says, "You'll start another war."

"We won't *start* anything," he says. He considers pointing out that this is all the warning the Lan are going to get, that if they forget who their allies are then the Jiang will cut them down, but figures it's a waste of breath. Lan Xichen is far from stupid. There's nothing to be gained from pointing out the obvious. "Now, has any work been done on the battlefields are we to start from scratch again? We don't have enough wood to build up proper fires that will burn hot enough. We're going to have to use talismans."

The First Jade of Lan sighs, but lets it go, easily falling into a discussion about the best talismans to use for a cultivator's funeral pyre that won't lead to the whole thing being too much for them to manage.

Unfortunately, the person who's most well versed in the art of talismans is unconscious. Wei Wuxian wouldn't even have to think about it, Jiang Cheng would say what they needed and he would have scrawled something down that would have done exactly what they wanted and used the symbols in a way that no one else would have thought to use them.

But Wei Wuxian isn't available, so he has to go to his second best option. Being able to check on Nie Mingjue while he's at it is just a bonus.

They're still about a courtyard's length away when they hear the shouting. "Perhaps we should come back later," Lan Xichen suggests uncertainly.

Not a terrible idea, except, "If we wait for Nie Mingjue to be in a good mood, we'll never get anything done."

Lan Xichen presses his lips together and Jiang Cheng can't tell if it's to suppress a smile or a frown, but he follows him to Nie Mingjue's room without further protest.

Jin Zixun and Mianmian are standing on either side of his door. Jin Zixun seems bored and vaguely irritated while Mianmian's face is carefully blank. He hadn't realized how used he'd gotten to the openness of her expression until it was missing. The words are still muffled behind the closed door, even if the volume isn't.

"Keeping people out or in?" he asks in greeting. If Jin Zixun wasn't here, he'd be friendlier. If Mianmian wasn't here, he'd be a lot *less* friendly though, so he tells himself that it evens out. "Is Jin Zixuan in there?"

Jin Zixun sneers, but Mianmian answers quickly. Possibly because she's trying to cut Jin Zixun off before he says something too terrible, or possibly she's just eager to speak to someone other than the man standing next to her. "Jin Zixuan is drafting a report for Sect Leader Jin. He ordered our current placement."

An excuse to get his two advisors out of his hair? Good when it came to Jin Zixun, but less good in regards to Mianmian. Although, since Mianmian isn't high enough in rank to even hold the position that he treats her as if she has, it's not like he can both send Jin Zixun away and keep her at his side. He's skating on thin enough ice as it is.

"Your current placement?" Lan Xichen repeats, barely elevating his pitch to make it a question rather than a statement.

"To keep Nie Mingjue from doing something stupid and leaving," Jin Zixun says, apparently sick of being ignored.

"You must be pleased that Jin Zixuan has such faith in your abilities," he says, voice as bland he can make it. He makes sure he's only facing Jin Zixuan, keeping Mianmian out of it. She might actually be able to beat an injured Nie Mingjue into submission if she needed to, after all.

Jin Zixun's lip curls back. Lan Xichen places his hand in the center of Jiang Cheng's back, pushing him forward. "Excuse us," he says pleasantly, opening the door and forcing them both inside slightly too quickly for it to be anything other than a retreat.

The sound of the door closing behind them cuts off anything Jin Zixun might have wanted to say in response.

To the Nies' credit, their argument cuts off as soon as the door opens, but Jiang Cheng is less focused on them than he is Lan Xichen, who looks very faintly pained around the eyes as he asks, "Must you antagonize him?"

He considers the hundreds of times he asked Wei Wuxian that very question. His brother had never given him a straight answer, instead just being infuriatingly vague before slipping away.

"Yes," he says. If he's going to be brat, he's at least not going to be a different kind of brat than his brother. He'd say he'd be less infuriating, but he suspects that's a matter of perspective. He turns to Nie Mingjue. "I'm glad you're still alive. What did you do to give Jin Zixuan the idea that you needed a little extra help at not moving?"

"Nothing!" he shouts, "I don't know why they're here." He's scowling in a way that would have had Jiang Cheng running in the opposite direction the first time around. But he comforts himself with the knowledge that he absolutely *could* take Nie Mingjue on if he needed to. As long as Nie Mingjue's injured. And he has Zidian.

For all the faults ascribed to Nie Mingjue in both timelines, a lack of fighting ability has never been among them.

Nie Huaisang is tapping his fan against his knee, dark eyes wide, and Jiang Cheng knows *exactly* who's responsible for the Jin presence outside. He wonders if he manipulated Jin Zixuan into it or if he just asked. For all that Nie Huaisang is extremely clever even now, Jiang Cheng still has trouble thinking of him as the same level of mastermind that Jin Guangyao had been. Possibly because he's an entirely different kind of clever that requires very little about knowing the intimate details on everyone around him and instead just knowing which messes to meddle in and which messes to leave alone.

Jiang Cheng considers being a little bit of a jerk, as payback for all the times Nie Huaisang has taken advantage of the mess of his life, but it's not any fun if he doesn't know why. "Is your brush only good for painting fans?" he asks, raising an eyebrow. "We need some talismans made for the funeral pyres. Not enough wood around here."

Nie Huaisang looks behind him, as if there's someone else that Jiang Cheng could be talking to. "Oh, um. Are you sure?"

"I'd ask Wei Wuxian," he says, shrugging, "but. Well."

Nie Huaisang's eyes widen then narrow before his face smooths out. It's barely a second long, and Jiang Cheng wouldn't have even noticed if he hadn't been looking for it. Wei Wuxian is the only person that's never underestimated Nie Huaisang's cleverness, if not his ruthlessness. He'd been hoping that mentioning his brother would give Nie Huaisang the impression that Wei Wuxian had mentioned his skill to him, but instead it seems to have only made him more suspicious. The last thing he wants is Nie Huaisang getting suspicious.

He sighs and rolls his eyes. "I was in class with Cloud Recesses with you too, you know. I wasn't completely oblivious to the work other people did." He absolutely, one hundred percent had been.

Nie Huaisang dips his head, and if he has any misgivings, they're not showing in his face. "Yeah, okay, yes. Of course. Whatever I can do to help."

He's clenching his fan too tightly and Jiang Cheng feels himself softening despite himself. He recognized that frustration, wanting to help but not being able to, wanting to fight just because it felt wrong not to be fighting when every else was. A-jie had found her place in this war and worked tirelessly, but he knows there's a part of her that hated having to be left behind for every battle, that wanted nothing more than to pick up her dusty sword and fight by their side. Not because she wanted to fight, but because she hated being the only one who didn't in a world where it was so often unavoidable.

"How is Wei Wuxian?" Nie Mingjue asks.

Jiang Cheng searches his face before answering, looking for disgust or rage or hate. But all he sees is the simmering frustration for his own circumstances and honest concern. Nie Mingjue doesn't hide his feelings. He's the opposite of his brother that way, having all his emotions on display despite his best efforts. The only thing he'd ever learned to do was cover his emotions with anger rather than hiding them.

He can understand that too. Anger is a convenient emotion and never far out of reach.

"Alive," he answers, not keeping the bite out of his voice. Nie cultivators have been particularly loud about their displeasure, but he swallows the more explicit threat he can feel crawling its way up his throat. Nie cultivators follow orders. More than any other clan, they don't disobey, they do as they're told, and they may not be happy about it and they may be very vocal about how unhappy about it they are, but they listen. They obey. If Nie Mingjue tells them that Wei Wuxian isn't to be harmed, then he knows not a single Nie clansman will go against that command.

Nie Huaisang winces, but Nie Mingjue actually looks amused. He's not used to seeing that look on his face, and of course it's Jiang Cheng's unsubtle promise of violence that's put it there. "Good. Let the Nie know if there's anything we can do to ensure he stays that way."

It's as good as a promise that they won't be harmed, that Nie Mingjue won't let his people act against them. He smiles, relieved. Lan Xichen looks down and away, but Jiang Cheng just knocks their shoulders together and continues smiling when Lan Xichen risks a glance his way. Lan Xichen doesn't have the same control over the Lan and Jiang Cheng doesn't expect the same promise from him, however oblique. The Lan preach following their hundreds of rules, but really it just means they think they know better than everyone around them, and sometimes that includes their clan leader. They'll take any punishment without complaint, but they'll also disobey any rule they feel is worth breaking.

There's a *reason* the Lan have so many annoying rules after all. People kept finding ways around them and they kept getting refined to the point where now they just get broken when the Lan feel it necessary.

"If we plan in here will you get some damn rest?" he asks Nie Mingjue.

He expects that to set off another round of yelling, but instead Nie Mingjue's amusement lingers and he says, "I suppose in the face of this broad of an assault, I'll have to give in. I know when to admit defeat."

The fact that everyone in the room rolls their eyes at the same time says something about Nie Mingjue, but he's too busy trying not to laugh to yell at them for it.

~

Wei Wuxian isn't getting better.

He isn't getting *worse*, but he's not getting better either. It's been four days, and last time he'd woken up by now. A-jie has practically moved into his room, and Lan Wangji comes twice a day to play for him, and Jiang Cheng doesn't let himself panic.

There's too much to do to panic. Besides, there's no *reason* to panic. It's fine.

Wei Wuxian hadn't improved steadily last time either. He'd been halfway to death then almost perfectly fine within half a day. He's more like nine tenths of the way to death this time around, but he's still alive, and he's not getting worse. Jiang Cheng has no reason to believe that it will be any different this time, that just because his brother is unconscious for longer that he won't recover just like before.

They haven't had to kill anyone yet, but that's more because the constant guard around his brother's room is effective rather than because it's unnecessary. There's already been a half dozen instances of cultivators heading towards Wei Wuxian's rooms, seeing the guard, and turning around. He almost orders A-jie to stop falling asleep in their brother's room because of it, worried things will repeat in a new, different way, with A-jie being killed because she puts her body between Wei Wuxian and one of their own who wish him harm. He doesn't order her away, but only because he's almost certain that's why she's doing it, that she's hoping her presence would be enough to cause an assassin to hesitate, would give her the time she needs to call for help.

He doesn't order her not to because A-jie isn't stupid. She knows what she's risking, and he knows that she'd die for Wei Wuxian, that if all she can do is be one more obstacle between him and those who would wish him harm, then she'll take that spot gladly.

He knows from experience that he can't stop her.

After the second time that A-jie "accidentally" falls asleep in Wei Wuxian's rooms and he still doesn't wake, he orders he and A-jie's beds moved their brother's room. Even if someone can get past the Jiang cultivators at the door, they'll need to get through him to get to either of his siblings.

Besides. Last time part of the reason improper rumors of A-jie and Wei Wuxian had circulated was because she'd kept falling asleep in his room, just the two of them, and it hadn't mattered they were siblings or that Wei Wuxian had been unconscious or that A-jie had been slumped over on the floor, fully clothed. What good were facts in the face of rumor?

He hadn't noticed. Hadn't even thought about it. What was there to think about? Wei Wuxian is their brother, he's injured, and A-jie is worried. There's nothing improper about any of it. It had taken the Nie Huaisang of his original timeline spelling it out for him for him to get it. People are horrible.

Formally moving them all into the same room means he can protect them and protect their reputations. He's sure *some* people will have no problem spreading rumors of all three of them, because people will believe anything scandalous as long as it's interesting enough, but higher society will hesitate, and that's good enough.

Of course, it makes them all look like codependent children, but. Well. It's not as if they *aren't*, after all.

Currently, however, he has to push all thoughts of his siblings out of his mind and focus on not snapping Jin Guangshan's neck. It's harder than he remembers it being. He hadn't been invited to this meeting the last time, and he tries to take it as a good sign that he's here now, even with Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue keeping him in between them, making sure there's always someone between him and Jin Guangshan. He tries to take offence at that, but it's probably for the best considering how his fingers keep twitching for his neck. Besides, if Nie Mingjue is focused on keeping Jiang Cheng from committing murder, then he's not focusing on the newly named Jin Guangyao and how much he wants to kill him. Jiang Cheng is providing a valuable service, really.

He remains silent as they discuss what to do about the last of the Wens. Lan Xichen doesn't want them hunted or gathered up, but even Jiang Cheng knows that they can't simply let them all go free, that not all of them are victims of the Wens. No matter how terrible the Wen Ruohan was, he was still their Clan Leader. Just because a clan leader isn't worthy of respect or love doesn't mean they won't have it, after all. Look at Jin Guangshan. Nie Mingjue being willing to let some of them go does surprise him, however, although perhaps it shouldn't. He's seen enough of him by now to know that angry, inflexible man he remembers from before is something that's probably due partly by being colored through his younger eyes and partly by only remembering what Jin Guangyao turned him into rather than who he was.

Then Jin Guangshan starts talking about the Yin Iron, saying how dangerous it could be in the hands of the remaining Wen or people with ambition, and Jiang Cheng does not run him through with his sword, does not wrap his hands around his neck, does not snap it. His anger doesn't usually run this hot, his thoughts aren't usually quite this reckless, but he's exhausted and stressed and *Wei Wuxian hasn't woken up yet* and here Jin Guangshan is, running his mouth about shit that he doesn't understand.

"Sect Leader Jin has clearly put a lot of thought into this," Nie Mingjue says, going into a light bow, which puts him that much more between Jiang Cheng and Jin Guangshan, and he has to resist the urge to grab the back of his robes and yank him upright. None of them should be bowing to Jin Guangshan, least of all Nie Mingjue.

Lan Xichen seems perfectly relaxed, if somber, and the only thing to show otherwise is the white knuckled grip he has on his own wrist behind his back. Jiang Cheng is the only one standing in a position to see it. "Sect Leader Jin. What did you mean by people with ambition?"

Jiang Cheng and Nie Mingjue both look at him, and he thinks they have the same thought then, that they may have miscalculated by being so concerned about keeping each other in check and hadn't thought to do the same for Lan Xichen. Jin Guangshan is talking about Wei Wuxian, of course. Never mind that his brother is one of the least ambitious people he knows, at least with how Jin Guangshan thinks of ambition.

His brother wants to be powerful enough to protect the people he believes are deserving of his protection. He wants to be respected by the people he loves. He wants the people he loves to love him back, although he'd never admit it, as if that's something that people need to *admit to* and not just how people are. His brother's greatest ambition is to die well loved, which makes how he died the first time all the more painful.

None of that is anything a man like Jin Guangshan could even hope to understand.

Jin Guangshan smiles, gives a non answer, and changes the subject. When Jin Guangyao appears, bringing with him the Wen prisoners, Jiang Cheng shifts slightly closer to Nie Mingjue. He knows the look on his face. He recognizes the look on his face.

Nie Mingjue wouldn't be this *angry* if he didn't love Jin Guangyao so much, after all. If Nie Mingjue didn't love him, he would have killed him rather than banished him. Nie Mingjue sees Jin Guangyao and aches because he's different than the man he thought he knew, thought he loved.

Nie Huaisang had laid it all out quite cleanly for him, but Jiang Cheng thinks he would have picked up on it this time even without that.

He stands in between Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue, looks at the Wen prisoners who he knows will be killed as soon as their backs are turned, and wishes that things could be easier. That the three of them together were enough, but they're not.

Not everything is all that different from how it was last time, after all.

Jin Guangshan has been a clan leader for longer than all of them had been alive. Lan Xichen isn't even technically a clan leader right now, regardless of the work he's been doing. The Lan and Jiang clans have been gutted by attacks, and the Nie have had to battle it out against the Wens for years, in a land that's harsh and demanding and gives them no rest on top of constant border skirmishes, and the Nie have been leading this war from the beginning. All of them are young and exhausted and depleted and their clans are all hanging on by a thread.

The Jin are not. Jin Guangshan is an established, experienced clan leader. His land hadn't been attacked by the Wen, and if Jiang Cheng is pretty sure it's because they bribed the Wen Clan, well, he can't prove it and there's nothing to be done about it now. Staying out of the war means that the Jin's coffers are still full, that their people are strong in numbers, and by sending his son and heir – as if he didn't have plenty of replacements in the wings – and his paltry force of cultivators, he gets to make a show of participating in the war without suffering the consequences that would have resulted from either putting his all into it or staying out of it completely.

Jin Guangshan isn't an idiot. He wouldn't be so dangerous if he was an idiot.

Jin Guangyao smiles and Nie Mingjue storms off. Jiang Cheng follows him because someone should and it gives him an excuse to get out of here. He doesn't feel bad about leaving Lan Xichen with Jin Guangyao. Those two had loved each other to the bitter end and are already so intertwined that there's no use trying to detangle them.

He finds Nie Mingjue standing in the courtyard in front of the palace, where the battle had occurred not even a week ago. The scent of blood and burned flesh still lingers in the air. What they really need is some rain.

"Want to talk about it?" he asks.

The incredulous look he receives in return forces him to bite back a smile. It's not like either of them are known for talking.

"Want to fight?" he offers instead.

The incredulous look doesn't fade. "Lady Jiang told me not to aggravate my wounds. Are you going to tell her you invited me to spar?"

All the brotherly pleading and guards in the world can't keep Nie Mingjue from pushing himself. But the threat of a disappointed look from A-jie can. He has no idea why people think he and Wei Wuxian are the powerful ones.

"Don't worry," he says, "I'll go easy on you."

Nie Mingjue's eyes narrow as he reaches for his blade and Jiang Cheng's already laughing as he unsheathes Sandu.

If only he could solve every problem this easily.

~

It's a terrible day, another terrible day of arguing with the other clan leaders, and not solving anything at all. It's late, so late that the Unclean Realm are heavy with quiet as he stomps back to the Jiang section, almost everyone else already asleep or at least shut away for the night. He wishes it wasn't just the clan leaders in these meetings, wishes he could at least bring A-jie. She's so much better at talking than he is, after all. He tells her of everything after, of course, and she listens with that little dip between her brows, then nods and tells him what to say, what the right words are, but then he gets frustrated and impatient and all of A-jie careful words leave his mind. He doesn't want to try to remember and regurgitate her cleverness. He wants her there to be clever for him.

He's aware he's whining and doesn't care in the slightest. It's just too himself, after all. And A-jie, but he's been whining to her his whole life, it's not like she's not used to it.

There's no one outside of Wei Wuxian's door.

He frowns. Sometimes one of them will go inside to keep an eye on him there, but usually they leave the other outside the door to make it clear that it's still protected. He supposes there could have been a breakdown in the schedule, but the cultivators aren't supposed to



leave until new ones show up to take their place, and it's not like it's been difficult to get people to guard Wei Wuxian. He could just order them, but he doesn't have to. They've all volunteered, because Wei Wuxian saved their lives, because he's theirs, because he's Senior Brother Wei and they love him. It makes no sense for the room to be unguarded.

He's right outside, his hand on the door, and he can hear A-jie crying.

He freezes, his heart pounding in his ears, the fear locking him in place the way nothing else can. The guards are gone and A-jie is crying. What if they're gone because there's nothing left for them to protect? But surely if – they would have gotten him if – unless A-jie told them not to, of course, then they wouldn't. But she wouldn't tell them not to. Right?

He leans his head against the door and takes a deep, steadying breath. He just has to open the door, and then he'll know what's happening, and he'll deal with it.

Once he opens the door, he'll know what's happening, and he'll have to deal with it.

He gathers up every ounce of courage he has and shoves the door open.

Wei Wuxian is alive.

He grips the doorframe to keep himself upright, the relief enough to drive him to his knees without it. Wei Wuxian is sitting up in bed with A-jie crying into his shoulder, her arms around his neck as he rubs her back. His eyes are strained like he's in pain, but Jiang Cheng can't tell if it's a physical pain or if it's just because A-jie's upset.

It's been a week since the final battle, a week of Wei Wuxian lying unconscious and not getting better but not getting worse. He squeezes his eyes shut to prevent his own tears, but isn't that surprised when he feels them rolling down his cheeks anyway. Maybe he'd be able to control them if he hadn't been so scared just then, but also maybe not.

“Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian hisses, looking down at A-jie frantically.

He can't help but smile as he steps inside and closes the door behind him, dropping his sword by the door so he can walk over and wrap his arms around both of them. Wei Wuxian startles like he's not expecting it, but it doesn't take him that long to lean into it, doesn't take long until Jiang Cheng has both his siblings' weight against him, and the frustration of the endless meetings is long gone. “You scared us.”

Wei Wuxian tenses. “I – sorry, I just, I hadn't planned to do that, but we were losing, and I knew the bride ghosts would be able to beat them, but I really had it under control, I wasn't going to let anyone get hurt.”

The first part of that makes sense, but the rest of it doesn't.

“A-Xian,” A-jie sighs, wiping at her eyes and then pulling away enough that she can cup his cheek and turn his face towards her. “A-Cheng didn't mean we were scared of you, of what you did. We were scared that what you'd done too much, that it had hurt you too much.” Her eyes shine with another wave of tears but she holds them back and gives a tremulous smile.

“We were scared we were going to lose you, A-Xian. We’re not scared of you. How could we be? You’re our brother.”

Jiang Cheng braces himself for Wei Wuxian’s disbelief, but he must have changed something for the better after all, he must not be messing this up too much, because Wei Wuxian smiles, large and pleased, as if it’s all he’s ever wanted, and it is, really. They accept him. They respect him. They love him. And they’re not going to let him forget it or think otherwise.

The moment is broken by the loudest growl coming from Wei Wuxian’s stomach that he’s ever heard. Wei Wuxian covers his face and A-jie laughs, smoothing his hair away from his face. “It’s alright, A-Xian, I’ll get you something to eat. All you’ve had is broth for a week, of course you’re hungry.” A-jie gets up to leave, but hesitates, her gaze still flicking over their brother.

Wei Wuxian figures out the problem immediately, of course, and scrambles to his feet. He barely stumbles before righting himself, and Jiang Cheng doesn’t know if it’s because he’s still injured or if it’s just effects of being unconscious for so long. “I’ll come! I’ve been laying down too long, it’s good for me to walk around.”

“Oh, A-Xian,” A-jie says, grabbing onto his hand, but she doesn’t disagree. Jiang Cheng can only assume this means that Wei Wuxian is mostly fine, just like last time improving back to almost normal in the course of a half a day. She has more than enough medical training to know if he was still too injured to walk around, after all.

They pass a Lan cultivator on the way to the kitchens. A-jie and Wei Wuxian are so busy talking to each other that he’s pretty sure he’s the only who notices how her eyes widen before she turns on her heel and walks in the direction she’d came from.

He considers saying something about it, but well, Wei Wuxian had scared them, nearly dying and being unconscious for a week had been very inconsiderate of him. Plus, Jiang Cheng is still his little brother, and that means doing something nice like suggesting he brush his hair or put on something besides his rumpled red underrobe is not in his job description. So he says nothing.

A-jie heats up more broth and pours a large jug of water, gives Wei Wuxian stern instructions to drink both, then gets started on making rice. She talks as she moves around, filling in Wei Wuxian with everything that’s happened this past week, speaking expertly about all the meetings she hadn’t attended. The way Wei Wuxian’s lip curls whenever the Jin are brought up settles some of his own anger. It’s too bad that asking his brother to summon an army to intimidate the Jin into being not too terrible would have the exact opposite effect of what he’s trying to achieve. But maybe he can at least start getting Wei Wuxian to speak up in meetings, the ones that he shows up for and is allowed to be at. He knows Wei Wuxian thinks he’s helping by not disagreeing with him or speaking over him, but he’s fine with letting his siblings talk for him. It means he doesn’t have to do it, after all.

“Wei Ying!”

A-jie drops her spoon and Wei Wuxian chokes on his water. “Lan Zhan,” he greets between coughs and Jiang Cheng doesn’t laugh, but it’s a near thing.

He turns to see Lan Wangji, the pristine and always perfectly put together Hanguang Jun, standing in the doorway with only two layers of robes on and his hair loose around his face, neither in his complicated ornamental style nor braided back for sleep. He'd clearly been in the middle of getting ready for bed when the Lan woman had told him about Wei Wuxian and he hadn't done a thing to make himself more presentable before running through the Unclean Realms where anyone might see him.

"Wei Ying," he repeats, not taking a step closer, not doing anything at all but running his eyes over Wei Wuxian, drinking in the sight of him.

Wei Wuxian stands, probably too abruptly by the way he sways on his feet. Before Jiang Cheng can more than half rise from his seat to steady him, Lan Wangji is there, gripping his forearms so tightly that Jiang Cheng wouldn't be surprised to see bruises in the shape of his hands there later, but Wei Wuxian hardly looks like he minds.

"Lan Zhan," he says, voice just shy of teasing, and leans forward until he's pressing their foreheads together, eyes sliding closed even as Lan Wangji's go wider than seems humanly possible.

Jiang Cheng nearly swallows his tongue. Wei Wuxian's bare forehead is up against Lan Wangji's headband, and he can't tell if he's touching it, but considering that they're so close that he can't tell, he's not sure it matters.

Wei Wuxian is smiling, his eyes still closed as he just breathes and lets Lan Wangji hold him, and slowly the tension leaks out of Lan Wangji as well, until they're both standing there, holding each other's arms and smiling with their heads pressed together.

"I'm glad you're okay. I was worried," Wei Wuxian says softly.

Lan Wangji's eyes flutter open. "Wei *Ying*," he says, a plea and a reprimand all in one, although Jiang Cheng really can't figure out what for. Not like that's anything new, of course.

Wei Wuxian pulls away and Lan Wangji sways forward, like he can't stand that much distance between them, before he settles back on his feet.

"Lan Wangji," A-jie says, her voice warm with amusement, "would you like to eat with us?"

He flushes, eyes darting around like he's noticing them for the first time, and it's possible that he is. He goes into a shallow bow, first to him and then to A-jie. "My apologies. I did not intend to--"

"He's staying," Wei Wuxian interrupts, stepping closer again so he can grab onto Lan Wangji's shoulders and push him into the seat he'd been sitting in. Lan Wangji doesn't resist, of course, just looks up at Wei Wuxian with a faint flush across his cheeks that Jiang Cheng wouldn't see if he wasn't looking for it. "A-jie, do you want help with that? I can get the spices out."

"I'm not adding any spices, you don't need spicy food right now," she says, but she sounds fond even as Wei Wuxian starts rummaging through the shelves, surely making a mess of

them.

He makes a wounded noise in the back of his throat. “Shije! I always need spicy food. Unless it’s your soup, that’s really good without being spicy. But rice should be spicy.”

Jiang Cheng thinks about starting a conversation with Lan Wangji, but there’s no point. He’s content to sit there and listen to his siblings tease each other and Lan Wangji is content to sit there and watch Wei Wuxian, his lips curled up at the corners just enough to qualify as a smile.

It turns out this day isn’t so terrible after all.

## Chapter End Notes

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# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jiang Cheng hadn't thought anything of the sworn brothers ceremony the first time around. He hadn't needed to. While the *effect* had been isolating the Jiang Clan out of an alliance between the largest and most powerful clans, while it had made his clan's position just that more tenuous in the cultivation world, it had taken a while for that to come to a head. It had made sense for it to be the three of them when it happened, after all. It was about the leaders of the war, the people who had done the most to end it, taking a bond of brotherhood with one another rather than an alliance between powerful clans. Nie Mingjue had been the only clan head between them, what with Lan Xichen not taking up the mantle until he returned to Cloud Recesses and Jin Guangyao no more than a tenuous and newly acknowledged bastard son. No one would have dared suggest it was a clan alliance with Jin Guangyao up there rather than Jin Guangshan or Jin Zixuan, or that it was something based on positive personal relationships with Nie Mingjue standing next to Jin Guangyao.

Of course, Lan Xichen had taken the position of clan head the moment he was back home, which had been expected, and Jin Guangyao had ended up the Jin sect leader, which hadn't been. And the Jiang had been left out, marked by all the ways they were different from the other clans, with their informality and their loose power structures, and Jiang Cheng had needed to forge his diplomatic relationships in ice rather than fire.

So the sworn brothers ceremony hadn't seemed like a big deal when it happened. A way for those that had ensured the end of the war to be acknowledged by everyone and for them to formalize the bonds they theoretically had made with one another during the war.

Jiang Cheng knows differently now, after all, but there's still nothing to be done about it. He can't even bring himself to be that worried about it even though the Jiang Clan feels more scrutinized than ever before. His relationships with the Lan and Nie are better this time, meaning at least they exist, and as much as he may dislike the idea of letting go of his sister, A-jie will be marrying Jin Zixuan. That'll cement the bond between the Jiang and Jin better than anything else, at least on paper, even though at the best of times they'd never really liked each other. That didn't matter. Sometimes the appearance of closeness could be just as useful in its own way.

He's already decided not to worry about it and is actually more worried about how the banquet in the sun palace will go the second time around.

All that means that when Lan Xichen steps into his room and adjusts his sleeves in a way that Jiang Cheng thinks means he's nervous, the last thing he's expecting is for him to do is go into a light bow and say "Sect Leader Jiang, I would like you to stand with Jin Guangyao, Sect Leader Nie, and myself to swear our brotherhood together before the clans."

It's only years of honed instincts and training that keeps him from dropping his sword. He's lucky he wasn't holding anything else, because that he almost certainly would have dropped.

“What?”

Lan Xichen’s face tightens, but he doesn’t say anything further.

Jiang Cheng would try waiting him out, but patience isn’t his strong suit, and even if it was, he’s certainly not interested in testing it against Zewe Jun of all people. “Lan Xichen, you need to give me something more to work with here. Why are you asking me this? I didn’t do nearly the amount of work you and Nie Mingjue did. It wouldn’t be right.” He doesn’t mention Jin Guangyao because that’s not an argument he feels like having.

“We disagree,” he says, at least straightening out of his bow. “You provided excellent battle advice, whether we heeded it or not. You handled the clean up after the battle, which is a difficult and thankless task. Speaking of thankless tasks, Jiang Yanli has been half running this war, perhaps not in strategy or strength but in the all the things one needs to actually wage a war. Without her reports, and her managing of the medics and supplies, we wouldn’t have been organized enough to survive.”

“So get her up there,” he snaps, not exactly sure why he’s so against this, only that he is. It’s too big of a change, and of course he’d come to the past to make changes, but not like this. Not something that he’s not prepared for and can’t explain.

Lan Xichen’s lips twitch at the corners. “Would that I could, but I think we both know that some of the clans would refuse to acknowledge her contribution as equal due to it’s nature, even though you and I know better.”

He’s talking of the Jin and Yao clans, of course. It’s ironic, almost, how badly Madame Jin wants A-jie to marry her son, marry into her clan, when her clan is the type that would ignore and devalue all of A-jie’s strengths. Had ignored them.

A-jie had been too new to the clan, too in love with Jin Zixuan and preoccupied with Jin Ling, for it to chafe against her quite yet, but Jiang Cheng had already been worried for the day it would. A-jie had grown up the daughter of a clan leader, was the sister of one, and had married a man who was meant to be one himself.

But the Jin and Jiang are very different. In the Jiang, A-jie is respected, not just because of her birth but because of her abilities. She’s the cool head, the steady hand, older than both him and Wei Wuxian, and her eyes had always seen more than theirs, no matter how carefully she lowered them. In the Jin, she’d been Jin Zixuan’s wife and nothing more. Madame Jin had hoarded her power carefully and stayed loyal to Jin Guangshan to the end and still she hadn’t had enough power or influence to do much of anything. It’s such a stark contrast to his own parents. They’d hated each other possibly his whole life, but it hadn’t mattered that his mother had been a Yu and a stilted wife. She’d been Madame Yu, wife of the Jiang clan head, and her power and position in the clan had not depended on her husband’s feelings for her. That’s the dynamic A-jie had grown up with, and no matter how happy her husband made her, Jiang Cheng had worried the Jin clan would not be to his sister’s liking for long. A-jie is quiet, but not silent.

She and Wei Wuxian are similar and different in so many ways. Wei Wuxian would break rather than bend and A-jie will bend and never break. It’s the same kind of strength expressed

differently, and mostly what it means is that neither of his siblings are capable of giving up or giving in.

Jiang Cheng had hoped things would change in the Jin clan once Jin Zixuan was clan leader, but, well. It hadn't ended up mattering, in the end. It'll matter this time around. But that's a later problem.

His current one is Lan Xichen staring at him while he tries to think up some sort of reply to this. "If this is really about those who won this war, then you know that it shouldn't be me."

Lan Xichen's expression doesn't change, really, but Jiang Cheng can see the sadness there easily enough. "Without Wei Wuxian, all would have been lost. But it is you who must stand with us. Because you are his clan head. It was you who ordered his actions, wasn't it? Just like with Jiang Yanli. Her work is because of you, in a way, because you brought her here and ordered her to take over the management of the administrative side of the war."

It's not funny but he laughs anyway. He's never ordered his sister to do anything, not really. She told him what she was going to do and he agreed and however everyone else misinterpreted that was their problem. "This your idea or Nie Mingjue's?"

He doesn't answer, just looks at him and waits.

Wei Wuxian won't be celebrated for what he's done. Instead he's being judged for it, persecuted for it, and this is a way for Jiang Cheng to protect him, just a little bit. By taking credit for Wei Wuxian's work, he's saying that his brother does as he's told, he's saying that he's on a leash and Jiang Cheng is the one holding it. It's another way for him to put himself between Wei Wuxian and everyone else, because it's saying that if they have a problem with what Wei Wuxian did then he's the one they need to deal with because he's the one responsible for it. He should be grateful, but all he can feel is bitter. "He deserves better than this."

"Yes," Lan Xichen says, calmly and instantly.

It soothes something in him, calms him down enough for him to say, "I have to talk to my brother first."

"Of course," he says, but he's smiling like Jiang Cheng has already agreed. He scowls in return but Lan Xichen doesn't seem deterred in the slightest.

~

Of course, when he does go and talk to Wei Wuxian, his brother is upset for all the wrong reasons. "It'll just make people mad at you instead of me."

"Yeah, that's the point," he says, exasperated.

"I don't want people to be mad at you," he insists.

Jiang Cheng just rolls his eyes and turns away from him to face their sister. "A-jie?"

She taps her finger against her bottom lip, a far off look in her eye. “Yes. I think it’s a good idea.”

“I don’t!” Wei Wuxian says hotly.

“Good thing that I don’t care what you think, then,” Jiang Cheng says, which is possibly one of the least true things he’s said in his whole life, but is true in this instance. If his brother’s only objection is being worried with how it’ll affect Jiang Cheng rather than himself, then he’s going forward with it.

Wei Wuxian’s eyes narrow. Jiang Cheng, having spent his formative years as a little brother, is bolting before Wei Wuxian even moves.

It doesn’t matter. His brother is still faster than him and he ends up bent over with Wei Wuxian’s arm around his neck while he rubs his knuckles into his skull, completely ruining his hair. “Wei Wuxian!”

A-jie and Wei Wuxian are both laughing as he struggles against his brother, twisting in his grip and failing to get himself free, but really he’s just grateful that they can’t see his face right now. There’d be so many things in it that he wouldn’t be able to explain.

He loves them so much. He has them back and he can’t lose them again.

He’ll do whatever it takes to make sure that he doesn’t lose them again.

~

The ceremony is more nerve wracking than he’d anticipated with all the gathered cultivators staring at them as they stand on the steps of the sun palace and bind themselves to one another. It helps that he’s standing in between Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen and barely has to see Jin Guangyao at all.

Seeing Wei Wuxian and A-jie’s proud smiles at the front of the crowd doesn’t hurt either.

~

The celebration banquet hadn’t gone too badly the first time around, but he finds he hates it even more now than he had before.

“You can still smell the burned corpses in the air,” he grumbles as A-jie smooths his hair back, giving him a slightly simpler hair style than he’d worn for the ceremony.

Wei Wuxian snorts, twirling Chenqing in his hand.

A-jie hums, and he can’t see her, but he knows her well enough to pick up on the subtle judgment in her otherwise pleasant tone.

“We should skip,” he says, because who gives a fuck about this stupid banquet, really.



“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian says disapprovingly, which is rich coming from him of all people.

A-jie gently tugs on his hair, stepping out from behind him. “The negotiations are done.” That makes him smirk, at least. The Nie are getting nearly all of the Wen territory, which on one hand Nie Mingjue is going to have a bitch of a time controlling it all with the number of cultivators he has, but on the other hand it gives him far more power this time around, and the Jiang Clan’s allies having more power is good for them, so it’s still a victory. “This one last thing and we can start getting ready to go home.”

“You deal with the formal greetings,” he says impulsively. “I’m going to lose my temper if I do it and when I snap and kill Jin Guangshan I don’t need quite so many witnesses.”

“Don’t you mean *if* you snap and kill Jin Guangshan?” Wei Wuxian presses. “Really, if you want to go around killing clan leaders, we should start small. Metaphorically and physically. I am of course talking about Clan Leader Yao.”

He laughs, some of his tension draining away. It won’t last but it’s nice for now.

A-jie smacks them both. “None of that! A-Cheng, it’s not proper.”

“Oh, not proper, well in that case.” He rolls his eyes. “We’re the Jiang. If we can’t be improper sometimes then we’re not really living up to our reputation, are we?”

They’re both staring at him. Wei Wuxian gently bops him on the head with his flute. “Who are you and what have you done with our brother?”

That question should unnerve him, should make him worry that they suspect, but he just rolls his eyes. If they really suspected anything then they wouldn’t be approaching it like this. “Proper is Jin. It’s Lan. It’s even Nie, with their rigid military structure. We’re Jiang. I am clan head, and I don’t want to deal with Jin Guangshan’s stupid bullshit, which means, my beloved sister, that I get to make you do it for me.” He pauses. “Unless you think Wei Wuxian should do it instead?”

“No,” they both say at the same time and probably for the same reason. It won’t look good if Wei Wuxian speaks for the clan, and Jiang Cheng knows that, but he doesn’t care. Wei Wuxian is his brother. Everyone can either accept that or voice their displeasure to Sandu.

“A-jie it is,” he says smugly.

~

A-jie walks in the front of their small group, him and Wei Wuxian on either side of her and the cultivators they’d chosen to accompany them at their back. They’ve all got white sashes tied around their waists. Now that the war’s over and this is an official function it’s only proper that they show they’re in mourning, not only for his parents for all the cultivators and people they’d lost that day on Lotus Pier.

They bow. A-jie does it properly, but he and Wei Wuxian don't do more than incline their heads. Considering Jin Guangshan does the same, he doesn't feel at all bad about it. "Jiang Cheng," he says, clearly ignoring that their formation indicates A-jie is speaking for the clan, and not using his official title to boot. "You've succeeded as clan leader and done an excellent job in the Sunshot campaign. When will the succession ceremony be?"

He raises an eyebrow and says nothing. Their mourning sashes aren't subtle.

"Clan Leader Jin," A-jie says, pleasant and even and only the barest hint of reproach in her voice. "The Jiang Clan is still in mourning. The succession ceremony will take place after the mourning period is over, as is customary."

"Ah, of course," he says, still looking at Jiang Cheng, who does not sneer at him and counts it a victory. "I was of course a close friend of Fengmian Jiang." His father had hated him. His mother had gotten along very well with Madame Jin, but that wasn't exactly a glowing recommendation of either of their characters. He also can't help but notice that Jin Guangshan doesn't say anything about their mother or the loss of the rest of their people, only his father. "I would have never thought that when I left Gusu that it would be the last time I would ever see him."

A-jie inclines her head, as if he's actually being respectable and addressing her properly. "This war has taken much from us all, Sect Leader Jin."

Oh, wow, A-jie's *mad*. This is fantastic. The obvious thing that she's not saying, of course, is that compared to the other clans, the Jin sect hasn't lost much at all. Jin Guangyao looks up for just a moment and Jiang Cheng doesn't think the surprise before he lowers his head once more is fake.

There's an awkward silence, one he knows that A-jie won't break, and Jin Guangshan is saved from answering by the arrival of the Lan. They incline their heads once more and go to their seats instead of lingering like they had before. He doesn't feel the need to stay and watch the strange tension between Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, and Jin Guangyao. As much as some things have changed, he's sure that that's just the same.

"Shijie," Wei Wuxian says admiringly, "that was awesome."

She grins for just a moment, small and vicious and so out of place to those who don't know her, before it gentles and she reaches out a hand to squeeze Wei Wuxian's arm. "The Jin walked by your rooms many times, A-Xian."

There'd been some from the minor clans, a couple Lan who clearly didn't mind being skinned alive by Lan Wangji, but mostly quite a lot of Jin cultivators getting too close.

If it wasn't for Jin Ling, Jiang Chang would forbid his sister's marriage to the peacock on that alone.

Everyone settles, mingling, and he doesn't miss the way Lan Wangji heads straight for Wei Wuxian. Last time they'd both left the banquet for this part, slipping away while everyone else exchanged pleasantries, but this time they stay, arms pressed together and heads dipped

close as they talk about something too quietly for Jiang Cheng to hear. He wouldn't worry about it normally, they've been whispering secrets to each other for months now anyway, but something about the tension around his brother's eyes and the way he's gripping his flute puts Jiang Cheng on edge. "Is something wrong, Clan Leader Jiang?"

He blinks, glancing up to see Lan Xichen standing in front of him. He looks over to see A-jie has wandered over to the other side of the hall to speak with Mianmian, Jin Zixuan almost close enough to be considered standing next to them but not actually talking to either of them. It had helped, slightly, that none of the Jin that walked a little too close and a little too often by Wei Wuxian's rooms had been any that Jin Zixuan kept around him. Even Jin Zixun hadn't made an appearance, and he knows that the only thing that could have prevented Jin Zixun from attempting to take his brother's life – again, in both timelines – is Jin Zixuan getting in the way of it. His cousin and supposed future advisor is one of the few people he can pressure into following his orders instead of his father's, after all.

He claps Lan Xichen on the shoulder, a gesture more like something he would have given Nie Mingjue, but Lan Xichen doesn't seem to mind. "None of that, we're brothers now. And far sooner than I thought we would be."

Lan Xichen's gaze briefly flickers over Jiang Cheng's shoulder and his smile deepens. "Wangji was very pleased to hear of Wei Wuxian's recovery. As was I, of course."

"You hear about how he went running around with his hair down and without his fancy over robe?" he asks. It feels a bit of betrayal to rat Lan Wangji out, since he's a fellow little brother, but Lan Wangji gave up those privileges when he decided to fall in love with Wei Wuxian. Now Jiang Cheng is obligated to do what he can to embarrass both of them.

For a moment Lan Xichen's smile stretches into something that can't reasonably be called anything but a grin. "Quite unbecoming and in violation of several rules of our sect," he says, but his tone is anything but disapproving.

Jiang Cheng laughs, turning just in time to see both his siblings lift their heads in his direction before they go back to their own conversations. "Come on, let's go track down Nie Huaisang. If anyone's going to be any fun here, it's him."

Lan Xichen's voice is quiet enough that no one can overhear them. "I believe he's currently preoccupied with distracting his brother from the," he hesitates.

"General fucked upness and utter audacity of throwing a banquet in the hall of our enemy when the smell of our people's burning bodies is still in the air?" he finishes, definitely not as quiet as Lan Xichen had been, but, well, he hasn't bothered to be diplomatic about shit like this in something like fifteen years.

The exasperation on Lan Xichen's face is such an older brother type look that he has to resist the urge to yank on his hair as a defensive mechanism. "Must you?"

"Oh, like everyone isn't already thinking it," he scoffs.

The Nie brothers are, as expected, in a corner and scowling. Well, Nie Mingjue is scowling while Nie Huaisang fusses with his fan and looks faintly distressed in a way that he's pretty sure he's seen before as a way to get out of trouble but is probably at the moment entirely genuine. If his fake distress didn't look the same as his real distress it wouldn't be a very good strategy, after all.

He elbows his way between them, mostly for the way Nie Huaisang dramatically wobbles and pinwheels his arms while Nie Mingjue huffs in what Jiang Cheng knows is genuine amusement. "This is the worst, huh?"

Lan Xichen sighs but it's completely worth it for the quick smile that steals across Nie Mingjue's face.

He stays talking to them for most of the time, although Lan Xichen wanders away at one point to speak with Jin Guangyao, and he doesn't miss the way Nie Mingjue's face seems to default back to a scowl whenever he's not speaking, but he doesn't point it out. He used to scowl like that at Lan Wangji, jealous of the person his brother loved so much, of the person who stood by his side instead of him.

That, however, is a mess he had not volunteered to clean up. His goal is to keep Jin Guangyao from snapping from spiteful ambitious bastard to legitimately unhinged psychopath. Something had gone wrong. At some point Jin Guangyao had gone from being painfully, intimately aware of the sorrows and pains and emotions of other people, even when he was manipulating them for his own gain, to something that wasn't really capable of that anymore, of understanding people or caring about them. Marrying his sister and killing their son, for one thing. The warped way he'd loved Lan Xichen in the end rather than the comparatively innocent and pure way he seems to love him now. Jin Guangyao was smart and skilled and didn't have to die, not if he could keep him from snapping.

Jiang Cheng still thinks it would just be easier to slit his throat and be done with it, and if he thinks he's failed, that's what he'll do. The Nie Huaisang of his timeline had years of fond, loving memories of the person who Jin Guangyao used to be that made him want to save him even with the knowledge that he'd killed his brother. Jiang Cheng does not have those same restraints. He's willing to try Nie Huaisang's way, but if it doesn't work, he'll just kill him. He won't risk Jin Guangyao arranging to have their siblings killed a second time.

This time when the toasts start, Wei Wuxian is sitting right at his back, next to Lan Wangji who sits right at Lan Xichen's back. He likes the symmetry of it, the symbolism. He wishes he'd had it the first time, but there's no point in those thoughts. He has it now and that's what matters.

Jin Guangshan ends the speech as he had last time – playing up the relationship between himself and Jiang Cheng's parents, requesting for A-jie's engagement to Jin Zixuan be renewed, and not looking at her once before turning to Jiang Cheng and asking, "What do you think, Clan Leader Jiang?"

There's a rustling of fabric behind him that he's pretty sure means Lan Wangji is in some way physically restraining Wei Wuxian, even if it's just with a hand on his arm.

He'll have to give up his sister soon. But not *yet*, and not like this, as if A-jie is a form of tribute that can be demanded and given. As if she is not both the daughter of a clan leader and a sister of one, as if she is not the daughter of Madame Yu, as if the only power and agency she has is what he allows. That's not true for a single person in his clan. Not that Jin Guangshan would understand that. He's so disgustingly transparent sometimes, thinking the way he runs his clan is how everyone else runs theirs, thinks that how he values women indicated their actual value. Jiang Cheng would be impressed by the audacity if it wasn't so insulting. He'd like to see Jin Guangshan ask Nie Mingjue for Nie Huaisang's hand in the middle of a victory banquet that smells like burned flesh and see how well that works out for him.

"Come on now, this is a good thing! Say yes!" Clan Leader Yao says. Clearly he hasn't learned his lesson about speaking out of turn at banquets.

"I think," he says coldly, "that you have once more forgotten that my sister is in possession of her own tongue."

The hall falls totally, oppressively silent. He's not sure that anyone's even breathing.

Jin Guangshan isn't quite fast enough in schooling his irritation into smile. "Surely matters such as this should be decided between two clan leaders? It's our duty."

He raises an eyebrow and brings his cup to his lips, drinking deeply. He's not saying anything.

A-jie glances at him and he disguises a nod behind taking another exaggerated swallow. If the timeline has changed so much that she agrees now, that's fine. He'll be brokenhearted at losing her to the Jin so soon, but it's not like he won't see her and write to her, and Jin Zixuan does love her even if he's an idiot, and she'll have Mianmian. He'll insist the wedding be postponed so as to not mess up his chance of getting Jin Ling back. But just like before, it has to be her choice.

She stands, giving Jin Guangshan a bow exactly as low as is required of her and not an inch more. "Clan Leader Jin. Now is not the appropriate time to speak of such matters. We are still in mourning and just as it is not the time to hold a succession ceremony, neither is it the right time for me to consider marriage. I almost lost my precious younger brother A-Xian and came very close to spending another year in mourning white." He lets his lips curl into a smile. She's steadier in her refusal this time than last time, and part of that is because *he's* steadier, part of it is because he already gave her leave to speak for the clan tonight, but most of it is this time around Jin cultivators had cased their brother's room, looking for a chance to slit his throat, and there is nothing that alienates A-jie faster than someone trying to hurt her brothers. "The war has been a toll on us all and it's a time for the clans to go home and rebuild what was lost so that we may face the new day stronger than ever."

"Here here!" Nie Mingjue calls out, raising his cup to the air. "No finer words for a toast! Drink!"

Everybody drinks except Jin Guangshan, who's lips are pressed together and his eyes narrowed.

“I should have noticed it at Cloud Recesses,” Lan Xichen mutters, his sleeves hiding the movements of his lips as he drinks.

Jiang Cheng tilts his head closer to show he’s listening.

“We were all so focused on Wei Wuxian, but really all three of you are trouble makers.”

He wishes they were sitting close enough that he could elbow Lan Xichen in the side but instead he can only scowl. A-jie hides a giggle behind her sleeve and he hears Wei Wuxian’s laughter at his back and has to drink some more to hide his own smile.

Even Jin Guangyao stepping in to save his father’s reputation and invite them all to the crowd hunt isn’t enough to sour his mood, although the adoring look on Lan Xichen’s face and the pained on Nie Mingjue’s almost is.

All in all, not the worst banquet he’s been to.

~

They’ve started packing up, getting ready to leave for Lotus Pier by the week’s end. A-jie is handling pretty much all of it and keeps shooing him away whenever he tries to help. Mianmian is by her side and giggling the entire time, clearly shirking her own duties to the Jin. Or more likely sent by Jin Zixuan to see if his father’s actions have totally blown his chances with A-jie. Jiang Cheng can’t even get himself to be mad about it, since it’s so transparent that A-jie obviously knows and he’s pretty sure if she hadn’t figured it out Mianmian would have just told her outright.

A-jie has just shooed him away *again* when Wei Wuxian steps up next to him and Jiang Cheng absolutely does not feel a chill go down his spine at the look on his brother’s face, because that would be ridiculous. Wei Wuxian doesn’t look angry or hurt or scared – he looks *nervous*. Jiang Cheng didn’t even know his brother’s face could look like that and he doesn’t like it. “What’s wrong?”

“I need a favor, and I need you not to ask me any questions,” he says.

Jiang Cheng frowns. As much as he wants to help the Wens, it’s not the right time. They’re too drained and too depleted. “What’s the favor that I can’t ask questions about?”

“I want you to arrange for a private audience with Nie Mingjue and then I want you stand next to me and not freak out when I start talking.”

Well, that’s ominous and a little concerning, but not actually the strangest thing he’s done for his brother. Considering he thought Wei Wuxian was going to ask for something like sneaking away in the middle of the preparation to kidnap some Wen prisoners and kill some asshole Jins – which, to be clear, Jiang Cheng would love to do if he thought they could actually get away with it – it’s a relief to say, “Okay.”

Wei Wuxian stares. “Okay? That’s it?”

“Yeah, come one,” he grabs his brother’s wrist to tug him along to the Nie’s main hall. “It’s better than standing around watching A-jie do my job for me or, I don’t know, you count Lan Wangi’s eyelashes or whatever you do when you two are together.”

Wei Wuxian sputters, but then they’re in the main hall, surrounded by Nies, and his mouth snaps shut. “Jiang Cheng,” Nie Mingjue greets, looking over a scroll while Nie Huaisang sits at his feet and writes something on fine paper with his beautiful calligraphy. It looks official. “Is something wrong?”

“Elder brother,” he says, because they’re sworn brothers now and there’s no reason he shouldn’t get to pull that card, “Wei Wuxian and I wish to speak to you.” His eyes flicker around the room. “Alone.”

Nie Huaisang is glaring at them while Nie Mingjue raises his eyebrows. “Very well,” he says agreeably. He gives a graceful, dismissive flick of his hand, and Jiang Cheng can’t help but wonder if Jin Guangyao picked that up from him or if it was the other way around. “Leave us.”

Nie Zonghui and Nie Huaisang don’t move even as everyone else clears out of the room. Nie Mingjue sighs and rubs a hand over his face. “You too.”

“Brother!” Nie Huaisang protests, his eyes going big and liquid and his lower lip jutting out the tiniest amount.

Nie Mingjue looks both fond and amused for a moment before his face is back to being mostly neutral. “I mean it. Out.”

Nie Zonghui sighs very loudly but says, “Come along, young master.”

He still doesn’t move until Wei Wuxian quietly says, “Sorry, Nie Huaisang,” and then he scowls and gets up in way that’s one smooth motion and yet is still clearly a flounce, walking out the door and reaching out to snag Nie Zonghui’s hand and drag him out with him, as if he wasn’t the one that had just told him to leave. Jiang Cheng would be more impressed if he wasn’t trying to keep from laughing.

Once the door closes behind them, Wei Wuxian reaches into his robe and pulls out a talisman, activating it with a quick blast of energy that expands outwards and seeps into the walls, the talisman pulling itself from Wei Wuxian’s fingers to plaster itself against the door. “It’s to prevent people from overhearing us,” he says before they can ask.

Nie Mingjue doesn’t look upset or angry, just confused. “What’s all this about?”

Jiang Cheng shrugs and gestures to his brother.

Wei Wuxian swallows and then goes into a deep bow, one far deeper than the brother of a clan leader is required to give, even to another clan leader, although not too terribly deep if one takes into account that Nie Mingjue is now also his pseudo sworn brother through Jiang Cheng. Something that Wei Wuxian obviously is taking into account judging by his next

words, “Nie Mingjue, sworn brother to my brother and therefore my brother, you once came to me and told me that I’m not alone and that you’d help me if you could.”

“I did,” he agrees slowly. “Do you want my help, Wei Wuxian?”

“No,” he says. “I want you to know that you’re not alone and that I can help you, if you let me.”

Nie Mingjue blinks. “You can help me with what, exactly?”

Wei Wuxian licks his lips. He still hasn’t gotten out his low bow. “You know Lan Zhan and I have been practicing in your lands.”

“Yes,” Nie Mingjue says. “I gave you my permission.”

“We’ve gone pretty deep in them,” he continues. Nie Mingjue just continues to look confused. “Sect Leader Nie. I use resentful energy in my cultivation.”

Jiang Cheng thinks he might have some sort of idea what this is about, but as promised he keeps his mouth shut. It’s not like he could say anything even if he wanted to because he’s not supposed to know anything. The confusion doesn’t clear from Nie Mingjue’s face. “I know that.”

Wei Wuxian stares at him with wide eyes, imploring, but eventually he straightens and runs his hand through his hair, ruining yet another ponytail and leaving it lopsided. “In order to manipulate resentful energy as successfully as I do, I am *very* sensitive to it. I was worried when I sensed some, and I followed it, and what I’m *saying* is that I can help you. If you let me.”

Jiang Cheng cannot fucking believe this. All the discussions he and the Nie Huaisang of his timeline had had, about how to get Nie Mingjue to trust him enough to tell him, how to try and steer conversations in the hope that he would stumble and they’d have a reason to know about the tomb. All of that, and Wei Wuxian just wanders a little too far and figures out the whole thing.

Throwing Wei Wuxian in the vague direction of a problem to see if he’ll fix it is annoyingly effective as far as strategies go and Jiang Cheng hates it.

Nie Mingjue pales, his hands clenching into fists. “You – who knows?”

“No one,” he says immediately. “Lan Zhan was with me, but he didn’t understand. He couldn’t sense it and I didn’t explain, so all he knows is there’s something in the woods that I didn’t like. Jiang Cheng doesn’t know anything.”

“Then why is he here?” Nie Mingjue snaps and Jiang Cheng does his best to both look confused and not take offense at that.

Wei Wuxian shrugs. “He’s my clan leader and my brother. If you let me fix this, then he’s going to need to know about it, he’s going to need to *understand* because I can do this, I



know I can, but it will be difficult. I won't put my siblings through this again and without even letting them know why."

His whole body goes cold. "Hey, what – what the hell are you talking about?"

His brother shoots him a flat glare, because he'd told him to be quiet, but this isn't something he's going to fucking stay quiet about. He crosses his arms and glares back until Wei Wuxian sighs and says, "I can't explain. It's not my secret to tell."

He turns to Nie Mingjue, but the Nie sect leader only has eyes for Wei Wuxian. "What do you mean you could fix it?"

"I mean I channel resentful energy through my body and use it. It doesn't harm me the same way it harms you, and I can do a lot better than just putting the whole mess under lock and key. I can drain the resentful energy away."

"And put it where?" Nie Mingjue demands. "It doesn't have anywhere to go! That's half of the fucking problem – I'm shit at channeling it, but not all the past clan leaders were. It just didn't matter because it's not like there's anything we could use it on or redirect it to without destroying everything around it, including the entirety of the Unclean Realms."

Wei Wuxian slips a hand into his robe and then the Stygian Tiger Amulet is floating above his hand, making lazy circles and letting out little puffs of black smoke. "I'll put it into this."

Nie Mingjue pauses, reaching out a hand towards the Stygian Tiger Amulet, but he flinches like it's burned him before he even gets close. "It'll give you even more power then."

His brother snorts. "Does it make a difference?"

"No," Nie Mingjue says after a long moment, "I suppose it doesn't."

Wei Wuxian already has enough power to crush the cultivation world under his fist if that's something he was interested in doing. Giving him enough power to kill them all twice over doesn't really change anything in the grand scheme of things.

"Well?" he asks, tugging the amulet back into the folds of his robes. "Are you going to let me help?"

"And tell me what the hell is going on?" Jiang Cheng adds. "Also, if it involves my brother nearly dying again, we're telling our sister."

Wei Wuxian cringes but doesn't protest, which is progress.

Nie Mingjue runs a hand over his face and Jiang Cheng feels a twinge of sympathy in the center of his chest. Right now he looks too old and too young at the same time. "If your siblings agree, then yes, Wei Wuxian. I could use your help."

A-jie doesn't say a word through Nie Mingjue's explanation of the ancestral tomb, his family's blades, and the burden all Nie clan leaders must accept in order to keep the ancestral blades from harming others, how it means corrupting their own blades and adding to the burden of their successors, how it's been hundred of years and it's too much and Nie Mingjue has known he was going to be lucky to die young since he was eight years old.

She doesn't say anything as Wei Wuxian tells her of the ways he can help, of what he'll have to do, of the risks he'll have to take. "Channeling the energy won't kill me," he says quietly. "The swords might, if I'm not fast enough. I can't control ghosts and drain the resentful energy at the same time. I'll be tired again. I'll probably pass out. Not as bad as before, this isn't actually as hard as what I did on the battlefield, but I don't want you to panic. If I make it out of the tomb alive, then I'll stay that way."

A-jie nods slowly, her hands twisting the fabric of her sleeves in her hand. "You want to do this."

It's not a question, but Wei Wuxian nods anyway. "Yes."

The silence is heavy. They all know it depends on her. Wei Wuxian won't do this against A-jie's wishes and even if he would, Nie Mingjue won't let him if both he and A-jie don't agree to it.

"The Nie are our allies and our friends," she says finally, and her voice doesn't shake even though her hands do. "They are strong and proud and good and as their allies and their friends, we have a duty to help alleviate their burden and take away their pain if we can."

Nie Mingjue sucks in a careful breath, his eyes wide. "You mean – Lady Jiang, are you sure?"

"I love my brother," she says, looking at Wei Wuxian as she says it. "I don't want any harm to come to him. But I know him too. If we walk away, if he leaves this place without trying to help you, then every wound you endure he'll carry on his own heart. He'll think of how he could have helped you, and didn't, and it will kill him slowly. To prevent him from doing what he knows to be right is to do him harm. I will not do my brother harm." She takes a deep breath, some of her somberness falling away, and smiles, small but honest, "And we are friends, and allies, and I do want to ease your suffering."

Nie Mingjue gets on his knees and bows so deeply that his forehead touches the floor and he won't rise until A-jie and Wei Wuxian push him upright. He's crying when he shows his face again, and A-jie wipes one cheek clean with her sleeve while Wei Wuxian brushes the tears from his other cheek with his thumb and Jiang Cheng just smiles at him and tries not to show how fucking terrified he is about all of this. He remembers the ghost blade and how powerful it was and Wei Wuxian is going to have to face against that and dozens others at the same time.

The issue comes when Wei Wuxian says that he and Nie Mingjue are going alone at night and no one will be allowed to go after them until noon the next day.

“Absolutely not,” he says. “Have you lost your mind? I’m going with you. I’ll protect you, just like I did in the last battle.”

Wei Wuxian smiles but it’s fleeting. “No. This is different, you can’t help with this one. I’ll be able to keep us safe until we get to the tomb, and then once we’re there it’s only Nie Mingjue who will be able to help me. You know that. You know how ineffective traditional cultivation techniques are against resentful energy.”

Jiang Cheng thinks about how useless they all were against the fierce corpses, thinks about how useless they all were against the ghost blade, and wants to scream. “No. If Nie Mingjue is going, then I’m going.”

“Nie Mingjue is different,” Wei Wuxian says, and the fact that he’s patient instead of patronizing, like he knows exactly how agonizing this is for Jiang Cheng to hear, makes him want to grab his shoulders and shake him and never let go. “Baxia uses resentful energy. He is literally the only one capable of keeping the blade spirits away from me long enough for me to dissipate them. I’m sorry, Jiang Cheng. This is an older brother only trip.”

He’s right. Jiang Cheng *hates* this.

“I’ll die before I let anything happen to him,” Nie Mingjue says, hand over his heart. “I swear it. We’ll come back together or not at all.”

That is not nearly as comforting as Nie Mingjue probably intends it to be.

“I’m waiting for you in the forest,” he says, “as close as I can get without getting in the way or triggering the resentful energy. Just in case.”

“Alright,” Wei Wuxian agrees, so easily that Jiang Cheng knows he’ll be in no danger at all waiting for them in the woods, knows that he’ll be no help at all and far enough way that he couldn’t get there in time if he tried, which is the only reason his brother doesn’t argue with him about it.

He hates this so, so much

~

Nie Mingjue and Wei Wuxian set out as soon as the sun sets, Jiang Cheng with them even though he’s to be left waiting for them at the midway point between the Unclean Realms and the tomb. The only people who know they’re leaving and why are Jiang Yanli and Nie Zhonghui, neither of whom are thrilled about it.

He’s not thrilled about it either, so that makes three of them.

As the hours pass, he can’t help but wonder if this was a mistake, if he should have just waited with A-jie. At least then they could distract each other. Instead he’s alone and pacing in the forest, watching the moon’s lazy journey across the sky and trying not to let panic claw at him at every hour that passes without his brother coming back.

He's not allowed to panic until noon. He has hours and hours left of wondering and waiting before he has a reason to panic. He's pretty sure he died in the final battle and this is him being punished for all his sins in the afterlife.

It's nearly dawn and Jiang Cheng sees it before he feels it.

A tree collapse, then another, then another. Not all of them, but ones that looked dry or old are snapping and falling in a wave that's making its way towards him.

He unsheathes Sandu and lifts it just in time to deflect the rush of energy heading for him, parting it around him instead of getting hit by it. It smells of sulphur and oranges.

It smells like his brother.

This better be a good sign rather a bad one, but he honestly can't think of what the fuck it means either way. He doesn't understand his brother's cultivation technique on the best of days and he literally has no idea what could explain what's just happened. Which means he doesn't know if it's a sign of something going wrong or going right.

He's going to end up giving himself an ulcer before noon.

"Jiang Cheng!"

His head snaps up. Nie Mingjue is riding Baxia towards him and is absolutely drenched in blood. Wei Wuxian is in his arms and Jiang Cheng's heart is in his throat as Nie Mingjue comes to a stuttering, exhausted stop in front of him, collapsing to his knees as soon as Baxia touches the ground, although being careful to keep Wei Wuxian cradled tightly against his body.

Jiang Cheng rushes over, dropping to his knees in front of him. "Is he—"

He doesn't have to finish the sentence. He can see the steady rise and fall of his brother's chest. He's pale and covered in blood, although Jiang Cheng thinks that most of it might be Nie Mingjue's, but he's breathing easily and his eyes aren't sunken in. It's so much better than how he'd looked after the final battle that Jiang Cheng kind of wants to cry.

Nie Mingjue, on the other hand, looks like shit.

He grips his arms, probably too tightly by the way he winces, and says, "Thank you for keeping him safe."

"He did it," Nie Mingjue says, all awe and not even a hint of fear, "he really did it. We're *free*. I don't have to die."

This will break Jiang Cheng's heart if he thinks about it too much and he's already had his heart broken too many times. "You might anyway, look at you. Is there actually any blood left in your body? Am I going to have to carry you both back?"

"No," he says, but he doesn't sound that sure about it. Great. Jiang Cheng isn't sure how exactly he's going to manage that without just throwing one over each shoulder, which he can

do, but isn't exactly dignified for anyone involved. More dignified than being left to bleed out on the forest floor though.

"Wei Ying!"

"Oh, that works," he says without really thinking about it. "Who do you think told him?"

Nie Mingjue rolls his eyes and doesn't answer but his whole body tenses when he looks over Jiang Cheng's shoulder, which makes him want to reach for his sword. He turns, but it's just Lan Wangji running towards them, as expected.

Except he's crying, a look on his face that Jiang Cheng has only seen once before.

"What happened? How did he," Lan Wangji chokes, cutting himself off and collapsing next to them.

Nie Mingjue shoots him a bewildered look but Jiang Cheng is too busy being confused to return it. "Lan Wangji, what are you talking about? He's not dead."

Lan Wangji shoots him a glare so furious that it would probably be legitimately intimidating if it weren't for the well of grief behind his eyes. "He couldn't expel that much resentful energy and live. It's not possible."

Oh, shit. Clearly Lan Wangji knows more about Wei Wuxian's cultivation than they do, but doesn't know what he spent all night doing, and so for him that wave of energy only had one possible explanation.

"Fuck," Jiang Cheng says, grabbing Lan Wangji's hand and yanking it towards Wei Wuxian, "No, here, he's fine."

When Jiang Cheng presses Lan Wangji's fingers into Wei Wuxian's neck he makes a wounded noise that Jiang Cheng has absolutely never heard him make in either timeline, but doesn't pull away. He sees the exact moment that Lan Wangji feels Wei Wuxian's strong pulse, his whole face crumpling with a relief so intense it can only be painful.

Lan Wangji takes Wei Wuxian from Nie Mingjue's arms into his own, holding him against his chest and looking down at him like he's first sunrise he's ever seen. "I don't understand."

"It's a long story," Nie Mingjue says, and now that he doesn't have a reason to keep himself upright he's listing to the side. Jiang Cheng shifts so Nie Mingjue can lean against him instead of just collapsing onto the ground. They really need to get back to the Unclean Realms and to some medics.

Wei Wuxian groans, his eyes slowly opening. "Lan Zhan?" he mutters, clumsily reaching up a hand to cup his face and smearing blood over his cheek. "Why are you crying? Was someone mean to you? I'll beat them up."

"Wei *Ying*," he says, in exactly the same way as he had when he'd seen Wei Wuxian in the kitchen after he woke up. "I thought I'd lost my chance. I thought you were gone."

“I’m not gone,” Wei Wuxian says, sounding more himself, his eyes brighter and more aware. “What chance?”

Lan Wangji doesn’t answer.

Instead he leans down, tilts his head to the side, and kisses Wei Wuxian, firmly and without a second’s hesitation.

Wei Wuxian does nothing for a moment, his eyes wide, but then he’s pushing himself up and wrapping his arms around Lan Wangji’s neck so he can deepen this kiss and press them even closer together.

Which is very nice and romantic for them. But.

“I’m right here!” Jiang Cheng shrieks and then Nie Mingjue is leaning almost on top of him as he doubles over in laughter. “I will throw up on you both, I really will, I swear I will!”

They break apart and Lan Wangji is smiling, a dazed look in his eyes that Jiang Cheng could have lived his whole life without seeing.

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian says, his cheeks flushed and lips swollen, and uhg, this is the worst, this is hell. “As soon as I can stand up, I’m going to strangle you.”

“Well, as soon as we’re back at the Unclean Realms I’m going to find a healer to burn my eyes out. What’s wrong with you? Are you done? Can we go now, fuck, this night has sucked so much.”

Lan Wangji carries Wei Wuxian, even though it kind of looks like he doesn’t need it, and Jiang Cheng carries Nie Mingjue back while complaining bitterly and loudly the whole way about being scarred for life.

None of them can stop smiling, which only makes him complain louder. No one even has the decency to roll their eyes at him for it.

Once they’re back at Lotus Pier he’s hiding in his room and sleeping for a week.

## Chapter End Notes

kiss! :)

i hope you liked it!

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# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When they arrive back to what looks like the beginnings of another war, Jiang Cheng has to wonder why he expected anything else, really.

A-jie is standing shoulder to shoulder with Lan Xichen and Nie Huaisang, all three of them glaring at Jin Guangshan. Or, well, actually, none of them are glaring, they all have perfectly polite expressions on their faces, but it's the type of polite they all get when what they actually want to do is glare.

He hates that he knows that. Not about A-jie, obviously, but the others. He can't believe there's a universe where he's able to pick up on Lan Xichen's irritation. He knows he's right too, because when Lan Wangji had looked at his brother, his face had gone perfectly smooth and then Wei Wuxian had winced.

His people, the Lan, and the Nie appear to be on one side while the Jin and the minor clans are on the other, standing behind Jin Guangshan. The Jin might have the benefit of being more well rested, having mostly not fought in the war, but surely Jin Guangshan isn't foolish enough to stand against all of them now? Ignoring that Wei Wuxian could wipe out all of them if they needed him to, those just aren't good odds.

He notices that Jin Guangyao, rather than standing next to his father, is next to Jin Zixun, with Mianmian and Jin Zixuan behind them. They're all off to the side and clearly doing their best not to get involved. Which is. Interesting.

"What's going on?" Nie Mingjue barks. If Jiang Cheng didn't know better, it would be impossible to tell that a strong wind could knock him over right now.

Well, going by the way Nie Huaisang and Jin Guangyao's eyes narrow in exactly the same way at exactly the same time, not impossible. But pretty close.

"What did you do?" Jin Guangshan demands of Wei Wuxian.

The way that he, A-jie, Lan Wangji, Nie Mingjue, Nie Huaisang, and Lan Xichen all attempt to step in front of Wei Wuxian at the same time would be comical in another situation.

Nie Mingjue steps forward, chin lifted in defiance. "What I asked him to do. He did a favor for the Nie clan that had some unfortunate side effects."

"Unfortunate – surely you can be this naïve?" he demands. "That level of resentful energy must have come from the Yin Iron!"

"Actually, not that it's any of your business, but it came from the Nie mausoleum," Nie Mingjue says coldly. "We'd had an issue with some restless spirits there and Wei Wuxian was

kind enough to assist us in their removal.”

“Restless spirits did that to you then?” Jin Guangshan asks.

Ah. Right. All four of them are covered in varying levels of blood. Most of it Nie Mingjue’s.

“Yes,” Nie Mingjue says unflinchingly. “If there’s nothing else we can help you with, Clan Leader Jin?”

Jin Guangshan’s eyes narrow, briefly flicking over all of them and resting on Wei Wuxian slightly longer than Jiang Cheng likes, before he smiles and says, “No, of course not Nie Mingjue. I’m just glad that you’re alright and there’s nothing to be concerned over.”

The way everyone tries to subtly step in between him and Jin Guangshan to prevent his fist from finding its place in Jin Guangshan’s jaw is funny, even considering the circumstances.

Their disciples all disperse, still eyeing each other warily, but their strange group all end up in medical, even though only two of them are injured, along with the addition of Nie Zonghui. The medic is a Lan, who’s lips barely twitch in disapproval over Nie Mingjue’s wounds as he heals them.

A Jiang medic would have had several cutting and loud remarks about the whole thing. Jiang Cheng finds the silent judgement to be more off putting.

“Well?” Nie Zonghui asks. “Did it work?”

“Perfectly,” Wei Wuxian says smugly even as A-jie is rubbing a healing salve on the wound on his arm and shoulder. They’re small and shallow. Nie Mingjue must have taken every one of the blows meant for Wei Wuxian while also fighting the blades off.

“Did what work?” Nie Huaisang demands, tapping his fan impatiently against his hand. “What was all this about?”

“Later,” Nie Mingjue says, but he’s smiling and his voice is warm, which Jiang Cheng is pretty sure is actually what keeps Nie Huaisang from throwing a fit in front of all of them. The Lan healer steps back, bowing quickly before leaving the room. Nie Mingjue frowns and picks up Baxia, holding the blade in both hands for a moment and running his hands over the intricate hilt before swallowing and holding it out to Wei Wuxian. “Here.”

“Hm?” He frowns as he takes the blade before his face clears, “Ah, right. I’ll channel the energy out of this one too, although you’re still going to need a new blade,” he says apologetically. “Once it’s used to channel resentful energy it’s really no good for anything else.”

Nie Mingjue shakes his head. “Wei Wuxian. No. That’s not – well, if that’s what you want, that’s fine. But you, your – you can channel resentful energy and it doesn’t hurt you.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes narrow and Wei Wuxian reaches out to pat his shoulder seemingly without thinking about it. “Mostly, yes. As long as I concentrate, and uh, do some other stuff.”



“Baxia uses resentful energy,” Nie Mingjue says. “Won’t you wield her, Wei Wuxian? You’re the only one who can, really.”

Everyone is silent. This is huge. Swords are personal, so personal, and that Nie Mingjue would even allow Wei Wuxian this is a very big deal, even if he can’t wield it himself anymore.

Baxia is also the only blade that Wei Wuxian will be able to wield, one made for use with a golden core but corrupted for years with resentful energy, one that’s been twisted and forced to work with resentful energy but has not yet turned truly malevolent like the blades in the mausoleum.

It’s not something that Jiang Cheng would have ever asked him, would ever ask of anybody, but now that Nie Mingjue has offered he can’t stop himself from saying, “Please take it.” Now everyone is looking at him, and no one knows that this is Wei Wuxian’s only chance, that if he doesn’t wield Baxia then he’ll never wield another cultivation weapon again. His brother doesn’t need the power, but Jiang Cheng thinks he needs the familiarity, thinks that this is one more thing to protect him. Not just that it’s Nie Mingjue’s blade he’s using, but that he uses any blade at all will at least allay some of the fears surrounding him. “I’ve missed flying with you.”

Wei Wuxian swallows, looking down at the blade in his hands. Then he gets down on his knees in front of Nie Mingjue, head bowed, and says, “I would be honored, elder brother.”

*Finally* things are starting to look up.

He allows everyone a few moments to gain control of their emotions and for Wei Wuxian to push himself to his feet again before he turns to Lan Xichen and says, “We should work out a marriage treaty before we go.”

He hadn’t known that Wei Wuxian could turn that color. “Jiang Cheng!”

“I thought this wasn’t the right time to speak of marriage,” Nie Huaisang says dryly. “Jiang Yanli made that quite clear.”

“Arranging a new marriage during a mourning period is against custom,” he says with an entirely straight face, “but seeing as Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji have been courting since we were sixteen, it’s only prudent to finalize a marriage treaty as quickly as possible before they go disgracing both our sects by kissing everywhere.” He pauses. “Also the next time we’ll be together to discuss this will be the crowd hunt at Lanling and I’d rather not do that there.”

Lan Xichen is the closest to outright grinning that Jiang Cheng has ever seen. “I suppose we should discuss Wei Wuxian’s move to Gusu after the wedding.”

He hadn’t known Lan Xichen was a comedian. He means to say over his dead body, but then A-jie is at his side, smiling perfectly pleasantly in a way that makes Jiang Cheng want to hide. “Lan Xichen, of course that is impossible. A-Xian cannot leave the Jiang Clan. Lan Wangji will love Lotus Pier, I’m sure.”

Lan Xichen's smile doesn't budge. If anything it gets even wider. "It seems we have several terms to negotiate."

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian hisses. "Are you just going to let this happen?"

Lan Wangji's face is even more perfectly blank than usual. "You look good in red, Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian is actually struck speechless for a moment. Jiang Cheng is almost tempted to give Lan Wangji a high five. Wei Wuxian licks his lips and asks, "Are you sure that this is what you want, Lan Zhan?"

Are you sure I'm what you want, he means.

Lan Wangji puts his hands behind his back says, "Yes."

Wei Wuxian smiles, clearly seeing something in his expressionless face that the rest of them don't, but Jiang Cheng can still see the uncertainty in his eyes.

He hadn't exactly been expecting a grand speech or anything – this is Lan Wangji, after all – but if he's going to be giving his brother up to him, he's going to need to put in a little bit more effort than that. He leans forward to poke Lan Wangji in the shoulder hard enough to bruise and says, "He doesn't come with a return policy. If he did, I would have gotten rid of him years ago."

Wei Wuxian rolls his eyes, mouth partway open to snap back at him, when Lan Wangji says, "Good," and his jaw click shut.

"Good?" Wei Wuxian repeats.

Lan Wangji's mouth almost looks like a smile and he steps closer to Wei Wuxian. He lifts Wei Wuxian's hand to his face, pressing it against his cheek so the tips of Wei Wuxian's fingers barely brush against his forehead ribbon. Lan Xichen's face flushes and he looks to the ceiling while Nie Mingjue raises an eyebrow and Nie Huaisang makes a big show of hiding his face behind his fan. A-jie just smiles and catches his eye and he knows the only reason she's not laughing is because she doesn't want to ruin the mood.

"Good," Lan Wangji says again, and this time even Jiang Cheng can hear the warmth in his tone.

A-jie may not want to ruin the mood, but he definitely does. "I'm pretty sure there's a Lan Sect rule against this." His sister whacks him in the side but really, he doesn't deserve to suffer like this.

"You just said we are betrothed," Lan Wangji says, somehow not embarrassed at all when even Wei Wuxian's cheeks are stained red. "This is permissible between those who are intended for one another."

Wei Wuxian looks at Lan Wangji from under his eyelashes, something Jiang Cheng could have gone his whole life without seeing, and now Lan Wangji is blushing.

“Gross,” he says, shoving at Lan Xichen until he lets himself be herded outside. “You’re both disgusting and we’re leaving. Come on, big brother, we have a marriage treaty to negotiate.”

“Shouldn’t you get some sleep first?” Lan Xichen asks but continues to let Jiang Cheng manhandle him out of the tent.

A-jie follows them out and Jiang Cheng doesn’t miss the betrayed looks the Nie send them at leaving them behind, but that’s not his problem. “You think I’m really going to be able to sleep after seeing that? Do you want me to have nightmares?”

Lan Xichen rolls his eyes. He leaves them long enough for Jiang Cheng to change and then comes back with the Lan disciple who had seen Wei Wuxian after he’d woken up and then gone to tell Lan Wangji. Lan Biyu is a senior disciple that’s several decades older than of them, although of course that’s impossible to know by looking at her face.

Traditionally speaking, Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian should be here, sitting silently in the corner and not looking at each other, but Wei Wuxian is terrible at being silent and all they’ve done since they were sixteen is look at each other, so it’s probably for the best that they’re not here now.

Besides, it’s not as if this is going to be a traditional marriage.

In his time, Wei Wuxian had been treated as a full member of the Lan through his supposed marriage to Lan Wangji (he knows there wasn’t a formal ceremony, because if there had been, Wei Wuxian would have invited him, he knows that now) and Jiang Cheng had thrown a fit anytime anyone had suggested that Wei Wuxian actually belonged to the Jiang Clan.

That’s not happening again. He didn’t go through all this trouble to get his brother back just to lose him to Lan Wangji’s eyelashes.

“A-Xian is precious to us,” A-jie says. “He is a treasured and irreplaceable member of the Jiang Clan.”

“Wangji is the Second Jade of Lan and in direct line for the position of clan head,” Lan Xichen says. “Of course it is impossible for him to leave the Lan.”

“Of course,” A-jie agrees.

Jiang Cheng doesn’t laugh at the way Lan Xichen and Lan Biyu each raise a skeptical eyebrow in unison, but it’s a near thing. “Neither of us are willing to give up our brothers, nor are our brothers willing to give up each other, even if we asked them to. So we won’t. I am willing to offer Lan Wangji a place in the Jiang Clan without requiring him to renounce his place in the Lan as long as you’re willing to do the same for Wei Wuxian.”

Lan Biyu’s other eyebrow rises so they’re both high on her forehead. “That’s an unusual arrangement, Clan Leader Jiang. You’re truly comfortable letting an outsider into your clan with divided loyalty? What if the Lan and Jiang have a disagreement?”

“He won’t be an outsider, he’ll be my brother’s husband,” Jiang Cheng points out, then grudgingly admits, “For anyone less honorable than Lan Wangji, I wouldn’t be willing to make such an exception.”

“For anyone less honorable than Wei Wuxian, neither would we,” Lan Xichen says, easily ignoring the way Lan Biyu’s hands clench into fists. Jiang Cheng’s chest flares with warmth at the show of loyalty to his brother. “They’ll never be happy if we make them choose.”

A-jie leans forward. “So we won’t. The Lan and Jiang clans have been allies for generations, despite our differences. There’s no reason to believe such an alliance will break down now. Should such disagreements or misunderstandings arise, surely this union will only be a benefit? Lan Wangji and A-Xian will have a deep understanding of both clans’ cultures and perspectives.”

Lan Xichen hums, but Jiang Cheng knows that he’ll agree, knows that Lan Xichen loves his little brother too much to do anything else. Especially now, in this time, when the Lan brothers understand and trust Wei Wuxian so much more than they had before. “They’ll have permanent residences with both of us and spend summers in Yunmeng and winters in Gusu. Fall and Spring will be up to their discretion.”

Jiang Cheng nods. Their most important festival takes place in the summer, while for the Lan it’s in the winter. He’d been planning to suggest the same. “Any children they have will have to choose a primary clan when they’re older, and then any children they have will belong to that clan. We don’t want to accidentally make a third clan here.”

Now they’re all surprised, but Jiang Cheng doesn’t budge. Both Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian are good parents, are parents who had *loved* their child in a simple, all-encompassing way Jiang Cheng had never experienced from his own parents. Even if circumstances change and Wen Yuan isn’t brought into their lives, he doubts they’ll remain childless forever.

“That is an acceptable solution,” Lan Biyu says, and she seems less tense than she had been before. Possibly some of her reluctance had been more about the potential of political disaster with this arrangement and less about prejudice against Wei Wuxian.

They stay in that tent a long time, drafting language that they have to mostly make up since there’s hardly precedent for this type of thing, and there are so many ifs and possibilities that they need agree on solutions for now, for times where either Lan or Jiang tradition will dictate.

The closest to an argument they get is A-jie and Lan Biyu politely and scarily disagreeing about the wedding particulars. He and Lan Xichen drink their tea and stay out of it. He knows it’s important, that it says a lot about status and relationships and power, and he’d fought viciously about these things when he’d arranged A-jie’s marriage to Jin Zixuan and he will again. But the whole point of this is that Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian are entering this marriage as equals so he just can’t bring himself to care about it. A-jie and Lan Biyu grudgingly decide on the wedding taking place in Cloud Recesses with Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian spending the remainder of the season and the next at Lotus Pier, which means they’re having a spring wedding.

Well. They're having a spring wedding assuming the crowd hunt at Lanling doesn't go how it did last time. Jiang Cheng hopes it doesn't, but he knows his brother, perhaps better now than he ever has. If Wei Wuxian believes that the only way to save the Wen is to go rogue and hide them in the Burial Mounds, then that's what he'll do, no matter the strings holding him here, no matter him and A-jie and Lan Wangji.

Jiang Cheng is just hoping that this time he doesn't have to. That after the Nie and Lan and Jiang have had a chance to rest and recover from the war, they'll be able to stand against the Jin and all the unacceptable things the clan pretends it doesn't do.

That they pretend Jin Guangshan doesn't do.

If Jiang Cheng has to murder Jin Guangshan himself to see to it, well, he's done worse things for worse reasons. At least he'll enjoy this one.

He and Lan Xichen finally sign the engagement contract with a not inconsiderable amount of relief. Usually these things are formulaic enough that names just have to be added, but considering the high status and the irregularity of their arrangement, Jiang Cheng's impressed that it only took a day.

They leave for Lotus Pier tomorrow and he's already dreaming of his bed when they all step outside, each of them holding a copy of the signed contract.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji are waiting for them. Wei Wuxian stops in the middle of pacing, his hair mostly out of his ponytail like he'd been yanking at it, and Lan Wangji smoothly rises out of his meditative pose to stand next to him.

Oops. Maybe he should have let them sit in on it.

"Well?" Wei Wuxian asks, looking nervously from him to A-jie.

"You are both too valuable to your clan to lose," Lan Xichen says, soft around his eyes and the corners of his mouth. "Instead asking one of you to give up your claim to your clan, we've opted to each accept the other into our clan. We've all lost enough in this war, after all."

"You mean I get to stay?" Wei Wuxian asks.

He's looking right at him, hope tentatively breaking out over his face, and Jiang Cheng can't even bring himself to make fun of him for thinking that they'd ever give him up, even to the Lan. A-jie's marriage into another clan had been arranged when they were children, but Wei Wuxian was always supposed to stay. He'd been the one that Jiang Cheng was supposed to be able to keep. "Of course you're staying. We just got you back."

A-jie bows to Lan Wangji, who Jiang Cheng thinks might be equally relieved, but he still can't really tell. "We look forward to you joining the Jiang, Lan Wangji."

Lan Wangji returns the bow, and that's definitely a smile that he's not doing a very good job of hiding.

To his surprise, Lan Biyu bows to Wei Wuxian. “The Lan Sect will be honored to welcome Wei Wuxian,” she says and doesn’t even sound like she’s lying.

He flushes, quickly returning her bow with less grace than he would normally. “Uh, thank you, me too. I mean, I’ll be honored to join.” He pulls a face. “Does this mean I have to memorize all those rules?”

“You already have,” Lan Wangji points out. It’s been nearly twenty years, but Jiang Cheng can still remember Wei Wuxian goading Wen Chao by reciting the Lan Sect rules. All the parts of him that hasn’t been horrified and furious had been impressed.

“Actually, I think this means that we have to teach Lan Wangji to break the rules,” he says.

The moment of despair flashes that over Lan Wangji’s face makes Lan Xichen laugh out loud while A-jie hides her giggles behind her sleeve.

~

They leave early enough the next morning that only the Nie brothers drag themselves out of bed to see them off, Nie Huaisang only half awake as he hides his yawns behind his fan and leans against his elder brother’s side. Jiang Cheng told them both they didn’t need to bother, but he’s still smiling as they trade formal bows and then Nie Mingjue gives both of them quick, gruff hugs and even goes so far as to kiss A-jie’s cheek.

“You should have done that where Jin Zixuan could see you,” Nie Huaisang says, now draped over Wei Wuxian.

“Huaisang!” Nie Mingjue barks while A-jie flushes.

Jiang Cheng might have gotten offended at that before, but they’re sworn brothers and Baxia is slung across Wei Wuxian’s back, a sign of the bond between their sects almost as good as the engagement contract between them and the Lan, so he just rolls his eyes and says, “Save that for where Madame Jin can see it, actually, if you’re trying to be helpful. Maybe if they feel as if they have competition the negotiations will go smoother.”

“Mianmian won’t fall for that,” A-jie warns, and they haven’t discussed what A-jie wants, if she plans to accept a proposal, but they haven’t had to. As much as Wei Wuxian grumbles about Jin Zixuan not being worthy of their sister, and of course he’s right, it’s still clear to them both that A-jie wants him anyway. What A-jie wants, she gets.

“Considering Madame Jin won’t take any Jin seriously who doesn’t have the right pedigree, I don’t think we have to be worried about that,” he says. “Besides, I think she’s on our side.”

Nie Huaisang gives elaborately clumsy bows to all of them that has to take more effort than it would have taken to just bow at them properly, Wei Wuxian yanks out Nie Huaisang’s hair tie like they’re still children, and then they’re off.

Jiang Chen and Wei Wuxian are riding next to each other at the front while A-jie rides in the middle of the procession and they haven’t gotten more than a couple miles away when he

hears, “Wei Ying!”

He raises a hand to put them all to a stop and Lan Wangji descends on his sword, stepping down from it in front of them.

“Lan Zhan! What are you doing here? Is something wrong?” Wei Wuxian gets off his horse and throws the reins to Jiang Cheng.

Lan Wangji shakes his head, opens his mouth, then closes it and holds out his hand. “I just – here. For your flute.”

It’s a dangling blue rabbit charm. Jiang Cheng notices for the first time that the red lotus charm is missing from Chenqing. He doesn’t get a chance to get properly huffy about it because it only takes him another moment to see it attached to Lan Wangji’s sword, the little charm out of place on the elaborate scabbard but tied to it anyway.

Wei Wuxian had given his charm to Lan Wangji to remember him by while they were apart and now Lan Wangji is returning the favor.

He’s going to throw up.

“A bunny?” he demands.

“Mhm,” Wei Wuxian hums happily, taking the charm and affixing it to the end of Chenqing. “Thank you, Lan Zhan.” He steps closer but Lan Wangji coughs, a flush across the bridge of his nose. Wei Wuxian grins and then looks to them, twirling his finger in a clear instruction.

There’s a ripple of laughter but all the disciples dutifully turn around.

“Seriously?” Jiang Cheng demands, crossing his arms. “I know there’s a rule against this.”

“Well, if you *want* to see me kissing Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian starts.

“Uhg! Shut up,” he complains, but turns his back to them along with all the rest.

He barely has a chance to impatiently tap his foot and he doesn’t *hear* anything when Wei Wuxian says, “Okay, you can look now,” so they must not do anything too traumatizing.

Although the besotted look on his brother’s face is traumatizing all on its own. The flush has spread across Lan Wangji’s face, but he bows to him before stepping onto his sword and flying back towards the Unclean Realms, so there’s that at least.

He waits until they’re moving again to ask, “Why a bunny?”

Wei Wuxian smiles and Jiang Cheng knows he’s going to lie before he even opens his mouth. “It’s because when we’re married we’re going to-”

Jiang Cheng shoves him off his horse.

They've been back at Lotus Pier for almost two weeks. Wei Wuxian still has nightmares and still drinks too much.

It's not like it was before, though. He's always drank too much, even when they're were in Cloud Recesses as teenagers, and it's rare these days for him to be truly drunk, unlike the first time around when Jiang Cheng's not sure how often he ever saw his brother sober. But this is better, this is different. Wei Wuxian is *here* in a way that he hadn't been the last time around, when he was constantly sneaking away to town to drink and never there when Jiang Cheng needed him.

Jiang Cheng doesn't bother trying to get Wei Wuxian to come with him to the council meetings this time around, except for every once and a while just to remind people that he's there. That's what A-jie's for, after all. Instead he does what he wishes he could have done last time and assigns Wei Wuxian the work he's actually good at rather than trying to force him into doing things that make him uncomfortable.

Which means recruiting and training. As the most senior and accomplished disciple of the Jiang sect, Wei Wuxian had already had a heavy hand in training the disciples, but Jiang Cheng puts him in charge of all of it now. He'd had to do it himself last time and he thinks maybe this time around he'd like to be able to get some actual sleep.

"I'll teach the sword cultivation classes if need be, or you can assign them to someone else if you want," Jiang Cheng tells him over breakfast while Wei Wuxian looks at him as if he's insane. "But you're going to need to figure out how to work with Baxia and there's no reason not to use teaching the disciples to do that. Besides, even if you don't want to use your sword, it's not like you still can't teach them the forms and the moves. If you need someone to demonstrate something that you can't do exactly the same, there are plenty of senior disciples for you to pick from."

Wei Wuxian is just staring at him. A-jie uses his distraction to move more food onto his plate. He's getting better at eating meat, but still prefers not to. He eats fish easily enough, which is much easier to come by in Lotus Pier than it had in the Unclean Realms. "Everything?"

"Not everything yourself, I'm going to want you to recruit through Yunmeng too. It should be easier now that the war's over," he adds. He's not going to begrudge parents who wouldn't let their children go to Lotus Pier when the chance of them returning had been so precarious.

"You can delegate. But it's your curriculum and you're in charge of it."

A-ji pours everyone more tea. "You should teach seals yourself, A-Xian, at least. No one can do it better. I'll continue teaching history if you like."

"You should teach the advanced and basic archery yourself too," Jiang Cheng adds. "The intermediate classes can probably manage to muddle along without you. Maybe."

He tries not to feel too smug about all of this and fails. Wei Wuxian is worried about damaging Jiang Cheng's reputation or getting in his way as clan head, which is why he won't go to any of the meetings that Jiang Cheng wishes he would. But this is different. Jiang



Cheng is putting the education and training of their disciples in Wei Wuxian's hands. He's putting the *clan* in Wei Wuxian's hands, even more surely than if he was standing next to him for every meeting and interaction. There'll be no way to mistake Wei Wuxian's place within the Jiang Clan now.

"You don't have to do this," Wei Wuxian says quietly.

Jiang Cheng raises an eyebrow. "Do you know anyone better? More qualified? You taught classes before, Senior Brother Wei." It's one of the reasons their people had been slow to turn on him, this time and last. Jiang Cheng had been too busy to do more than teach the occasional class in their youth, instead learning about how to run a clan from his parents. A-jie hadn't been strong enough to teach anything physical, so the bulk of it had fallen to Wei Wuxian, who'd been an aid in many of the classes that he wasn't teaching himself, as has been his duty as the first disciple. Most of the classes Wei Wuxian had taught before had been the beginner's ones, teaching their disciples the building blocks of their cultivation. He's always been good with kids, even when he was little more than a kid himself. "Our people get the best, don't they? That's you."

Seeing his brother cry because he's happy is a nice change.

~

Jiang Cheng is so focused that he doesn't notice A-jie until she stands next to him, pressing a cup of steaming tea into his hands. It's early enough that they're pretty much the only ones awake. "How's it going?"

Wei Wuxian moves Baxia like he would Suibian, realizes his mistake partway through, and the cultivation energy collapses around him.

Jiang Cheng snorts.

His brother whirls around to point Baxia at him threateningly, sees A-jie, then drops the blade to jut out his bottom lip. "Shijie, Jiang Cheng is being mean to me!"

"He hasn't sliced himself open with it yet, so there's that," he says generously.

He drops the pout to scowl. "I don't know how all the Nie manage to use such wide blades."

They're not usually quite as wide as Baxia, but Wei Wuxian has a point. The wider the blade, the more energy is channeled through it. Suibian had been a slimmer sword than average, which is something that Jiang Cheng is pretty sure his mother insisted on, and it had caused plenty of people to underestimate his brother.

Because Wei Wuxian had never wielded his sword quite like anyone else. And now he's trying to wield Baxia like he wielded Suibian.

"I think you're doing it wrong," he says. Wei Wuxian opens his mouth to snap at him and he shakes his head, "No, listen, I'm serious. You always overloaded Suibian, forcing a comparatively large amount of energy to come out of a slim blade, which made it more

concentrated, so it was stronger and purer than you could have produced normally with the same effort.” He thinks his mother had meant it has a handicap, but Wei Wuxian had turned it into a strength instead. Then again, it’s not like many other people could have pulled it off, since few had a golden core as strong as his brother’s.

Which is now his.

It’s possible he’s going to have to reassess his own training schedule.

“So?” Wei Wuxian asks, but Jiang Cheng can tell by his frown that he’s already thinking it through.

“So you’re using resentful energy, which you obviously have more than enough to do the same, even with such a wide blade, but instead of being precise, it’s too much, especially because you’re still doing the Jiang style. If you overpower a blade this wide while trying to be fast and precise, it’s all going to fall apart, it’s too much energy.”

He means to continue, but Wei Wuxian’s eyes light up and he says, “Wait, yeah, no okay,” and then he goes back into a starting position.

He slides the blade in a wide arc, a move he never would have made with Suibian, and resentful energy sweeps out in a wave. Instead of breaking partway, Wei Wuxian flicks the blade and brings it back behind him, curving the arc down and then up in a move that looks more Lan than Jiang or Nie. The energy follows in thick ribbons, creating a barrier in one move that would have taken him several with Suibian.

A-jie claps and Jiang Cheng takes a sip of his tea to hide his smile. Of course two seconds after figuring it out he’s inventing new, stronger, and more efficient moves.

“I think I’m going to have to create a new sword style,” he mutters, staring at the blade.

“Wang Yan will be thrilled,” he says dryly and he’s not joking. She’s been helping Wei Wuxian with the sword classes and loving it.

Wei Wuxian looks up at him, his grin so bright and warm that Jiang Cheng can’t help but return it. “Thank you.”

“You would have figured it out eventually,” he scoffs, wishing there was something to hide behind besides the now empty teacup in his hand.

“Maybe,” he says, still with that warm smile.

He turns to A-jie because he thinks that might be safer, but she’s looking at him the same way, so he huffs and heads back to his room. A-jie handles a lot of the reports and paperwork, but he still has to sign off on most things, so there’s a great big stack of busywork waiting for him in his office.

Except then Wei Wuxian’s arm is across his shoulders, Baxia once more at his back, and A-jie comes up on his other side, tugging at his arm in the opposite direction. “You’re going the wrong way, A-Cheng, we haven’t had breakfast yet.”

His siblings keep him between them as they discuss their new recruitment strategy and Jiang Cheng keeps his head ducked so they can't see the look on his face.

~

This time, a year after the Wen's attack on Lotus Pier, he doesn't let Wei Wuxian sit at the back like his brother had insisted on doing last time. Instead when he says that Wei Wuxian will be by his side, where he's always wanted him, and it only takes A-jie giving Wei Wuxian a stern look to quell his protests. Wei Wuxian is his brother, is Senior Brother Wei, and the head instructor for their disciples. It's improper for him to be anywhere else, after all.

That night, A-jie comes to him, a bundle of cloth in her arms. She looks nervous, which isn't good. "Do you think – will you come with me?"

"Of course," he says, even though he's not totally sure what he's agreeing to.

He follows A-jie to their brother's room and she knocks before stepping inside. There are several candles burning and Wei Wuxian rises out of his meditative pose. Because that's something he does now, every night. He's not *happy* about it, but apparently it's one of the things that helps him be able to channel the resentful energy without it either killing him or driving him mad. It's good that he's doing it, but that doesn't make it any less strange to see.

"Something wrong?" he asks, looking between them.

Jiang Cheng shrugs and tilts his head towards A-jie.

She takes a deep breath, smiles, and holds out the bundle of cloth. "You don't have to wear them if you don't want to. But you can. And I'd like it if you did."

Wei Wuxian takes the cloth and shakes it out. His eyes go wide and Jiang Cheng is pretty sure his brother's too focused on the clothes to hear his surprised intake of breath.

It's a set of robes in the exact style their brother favors, but instead of black it's dark purple and instead of red it's a deep plum.

It's Jiang colors, which his brother has never worn more than a hint of, and even that was rare. Jiang Cheng hadn't wanted to push, in either timeline. It's such a small thing, after all, in the grand scheme of things, hardly worth yelling about.

"For the ceremony, at least," A-jie says, twisting her hands together anxiously. "But you could wear them more. Or all the time. They're your colors, A-Xian. No one's going to yell at you for wearing them."

Jiang Cheng blinks. "Why would anyone yell at him for wearing them?" Neither of them say anything and the answer comes to him anyway a moment later. His mother had been a strong, powerful woman who loved him. But he's getting tired of finding new reasons to be disappointed in her, especially when she's dead and he can't do anything about it. "That's ridiculous! All our disciples wear our colors, and you're our brother besides! What are you if not Jiang?"

“She didn’t want me to forget that I was Wei, is all,” he says quietly.

Yeah, right. “And wasn’t your father part of this clan? You are your parents’ son and you should be proud of that. But you’re the Jiang senior disciple and *our brother* and you should be proud of that too!”

He hadn’t meant to shout that last part and he realizes his hands are clenched into fists and his chest is heaving, and this is all probably a bit of an over reaction, but he’s just so fed up with every new reason he finds for why Wei Wuxian thought that he hadn’t belonged with them. That it hadn’t been all his fault isn’t a relief like he thought it’d be.

“I am,” he says earnestly, “Of course I am, Jiang Cheng.”

“Then act like it,” he snaps, knowing that’s not fair and he’s being cruel when he doesn’t have to be, but Wei Wuxian is Jiang and his brother and he’s supposed to stay. How many different ways does he need to tell his brother that he belongs with them before he starts believing him?

But instead of getting hurt or angry, Wei Wuxian is smiling at him. “Okay, Jiang Cheng. I will.”

Wei Wuxian is wearing the robes when he and A-jie stand next to him as he takes his oath as clan head in front of their people and it feels right, it feels like he’s really gotten something right in all this.

~

Weeks turn to months. Wei Wuxian seems to acquire a whole new wardrobe seemingly overnight, something that he knows is A-jie’s doing, and he always dresses in Jiang colors now. Even when he wears his old black robes he’ll wear a purple underrobe, and it’s good, it’s enough, that even if someone knew nothing else about him they’d look at Wei Wuxian and know that he belongs to the Jiang Clan.

Their numbers double, then nearly triple. Jiang Cheng is doing way less of the work than he had the last time around, but between their clan not being decimated in the final battle and their recruits, their numbers have increased enough that he’s just as busy. Wei Wuxian has roped A-jie into helping him recruit, and it really just drives home that he is not the people person out of his siblings, which of course he’d already known. Their new disciples and people come from further than Yunmeng, everything they own on their back and looking for a new start.

“Those are Wen,” Jiang Cheng says with a calm he doesn’t feel looking at the new batch of recruits his siblings have brought in. It’s no one he recognizes, but he knows he’s right.

They glance at each other and A-jie says, “Not for sure. We can’t prove that they are. The war tore a lot of people apart. Everyone is taking in displaced people.”

They’re not. Maybe into their land, but not into their clan, but the Jiang have never done anything quite like anyone else and there’s no reason for them to start now. It takes strength

and loyalty to be a Jiang disciple. These Wen could be dangerous, as dangerous as Jin Guangshan had warned them about, but there aren't many people that can fool both Wei Wuxian and A-jie. The only one he can think of is Jin Guangyao, and he doubts any of these people are quite up to that level of underhanded and manipulative. He can cause a fuss. Technically, they should be turning them over to the Jin, but that's the last thing he wants to do.

"We never had this conversation," he sighs and makes a note to make sure none of them accompany them to the crowd hunt to the Jin, because there's no way that'll end well.

A-jie kisses his cheek and Wei Wuxian claps him in the arm. He goes and hides in his office because all these new disciples and new people in the pier have generated an awful lot of paperwork, after all.

Wei Wuxian and Wang Yan are successfully creating a whole new sword style that the rest of disciples have adopted with mixed results. Wei Wuxian now wields Baxia almost as well as he had Suibian, but the new style relies on equal parts strength and grace. The disciples with a decent knowledge of dancing seem to be doing better with it, but it's hard to know for sure since Wei Wuxian is only letting the advanced disciples attempt to incorporate the new style so as to not muddle the way for the disciples who are still attempting to master the Jiang style.

Wei Wuxian trades letters with Lan Wangji with about as much regularity as they can manage, reading each of them with an eagerness that actually makes him look his age.

Jiang Cheng hopes it's enough. Wei Wuxian has a clear, undeniable place in their clan, he knows his siblings love him, and he's engaged to Lan Wangji. It has to be enough to keep him here, surely.

It has to be enough for Wei Wuxian to choose his family over his duty. For him to realize that he has a duty *to* his family.

Jiang Cheng doesn't know what he'll do if it isn't.

~

This time, it's not Jin Zixuan who shows up at Lotus Pier to deliver the formal invitation to the crowd hunt.

He and Wei Wuxian are in the middle of demonstrating sword forms to the beginner class in the courtyard, the children following their movements with admirable precision. Jiang Cheng finds he enjoys teaching a lot more when it's something he only does occasionally at his brother's request rather than every day.

"Mianmian!" Wei Wuxian says excitedly, dropping his form to hurry over to the entrance.

Jiang Cheng blinks, but sure enough Mianmian is there, the disciple who'd escorted her here hanging back as Wei Wuxian lifts her up into a tight hug and spins her around. She laughs and punches him in the shoulder when he puts her down, her face bright and open and

friendly. “Wei Wuxian! You look good and not half dead like I last saw you. I can’t believe the rumors about Baxia were true. How do you manage to wield that thing?”

Wei Wuxian smirks. “Mianmian, I’m an engaged man. We really shouldn’t be talking about how I handle my sword.”

She rolls her eyes and smacks him with her own sword, but by the twist of her mouth she’s amused.

Jiang Cheng dismisses the class with quick gesture as he walks over to them. The older kids end up having to be pulled away by the younger, who are less curious than they are eager to head to lunch early. “It’s good to see you again, Mianmian. But how did you get in without waiting for permission?” He’s speaking to Mianmian but glaring at the disciple who blanches in return. He doesn’t have a problem with Mianmian being let in, but he doesn’t want any other Jin running about Lotus Pier without his knowledge.

“Sect Leader Jiang,” she says, going into a formal bow. She pulls out an invitation from her sleeve and hands it to him. “Jiang Yanli gave this to me before we left.”

He glances at it and stops glaring at the disciple who breathes a sigh of relief and starts edging away. It’s a formal invitation to visit Lotus Pier at Mianmian’s convenience with his sister’s seal. “Ah,” he says, “well, come on, let’s go find her.”

“I don’t want to interrupt you if you’re busy,” she says, but doesn’t shrug off the arm that Wei Wuxian swings over her shoulders.

“Nonsense,” he says cheerfully. “Jiang Cheng already sent the class away anyway. They’d be heartbroken if we made them come *back*.”

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes but leads them to one of the side halls, briefly pausing to ask one of the servants to get his sister and have a tea service sent there. He’d made Jin Zixuan sit in the main hall with all of them far apart and formal, but that’s not right for Mianmian. Instead he brings them all to sit at the same table in a room that’s meant for guests but is smaller and more intimate.

A-jie doesn’t run, but she does arrive walking more quickly than normal, and she and Mianmian share a hug and clutch at each other’s arms, talking excitedly to one another while the tea is served.

“I do have an official reason for being here,” Mianmian admits, getting to her feet to present Jiang Cheng with the invitation. “The Jin Clan officially invites the Jiang Clan to the crowd hunt.”

“You came all the way here just for that?” Wei Wuxian presses even as he plucks the invitation from Jiang Cheng’s hands to read it himself.

Mianmian shakes her head and addresses A-jie even as she keeps her body facing him. “Madam Jin would like you to come and watch the crowd hunt as well. She asked Jin Zixuan to come and extend the invitation himself.”

A-jie flinches and Wei Wuxian snaps, “And he refused?”

“No!” Mianmian says, eyes wide. “He asked me to come instead because he would very much like Jiang Yanli to accept the invitation, and he thought that she’d be more likely to agree if I was the one asking.”

“He wants me to accept?” A-jie asks quietly, twisting her hands together in her lap.

She nods, abandoning her formal position to sit next to A-jie and take her hands in her own. She doesn’t seem anything but sincere when she says, “Very much. Jin Zixuan is imperfect, but he’s a good man. I wouldn’t be so close to him if he wasn’t.”

Mianmian’s friendship is perhaps the best character reference Jin Zixuan has. Or the only one, really.

A-jie swallows and turns to look at him and Wei Wuxian. “It’s your choice, A-jie,” he says softly.

Last time he and Wei Wuxian had looked at each other in despair, both of them equally devastated by A-jie’s acceptance. But he knows that A-jie loves him and that her leaving gets him Jin Ling. It doesn’t hurt that this time around Jin Zixuan has shown himself not to be a complete asshole.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t have that knowledge, but he presses his lips together and gives one firm, short nod. “Whatever you want, Shijie.”

Something eases from her face then and there’s a smile at the corner of her lips when she tells Mianmian, “I gladly accept Madame Jin’s invitation.”

Mianmian beams and hugs her again and Jiang Cheng tries not to let any of the emotions he’s feeling show on his face.

The crowd hunt had been the beginning of the end. A-jie accepting Jin Zixuan’s proposal and Wei Wuxian breaking away from the clan to protect the Wen, things that on their own hadn’t been devastating but had led to much worse. Last time he’d left Lotus Pier with both his siblings and returned with neither of them.

This time will be different.

It has to be.

## Chapter End Notes

sorry this took so long! life got in the way.

i hope you liked it!

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# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Madame Jin is waiting for them when they arrive. A-jie is still in the palanquin in the center of the disciples, hidden away. Last time Jiang Cheng had let her stand next to him while Wei Wuxian had stood in the back, because he couldn't stand their alone and Wei Wuxian had said that it shouldn't be him, that he would only make things difficult.

This time, Wei Wuxian had still said his being next to Jiang Cheng would cause problems. He hadn't said that he shouldn't be there, although he does wear his old black robes. He's wearing one of his purple underrobes, at least. It still feels like a victory.

"Sect Leader Jiang," Madame Jin says warmly, bowing to him even as she eyes the palanquin.

He returns the bow and waits. She hasn't finished greeting them, after all.

She falters then turns to his brother, her smile becoming a little more fixed. "Wei Wuxian," she says, less of a greeting than an observation, and does not bow.

"Is that how you greet my brother?" he asks. Wei Wuxian twitches like he wants to hit him. He's not going to sabotage A-jie here, obviously, he wants his nephew back, but he doesn't have to play nice either. Jin Zixuan will ask. A-jie will answer. It really has very little to do with him, no matter what Madame Jin and Jin Guangshan seem to think.

"Ah," she says, less warmly. She bows to Wei Wuxian, only slightly shallower than she'd bowed to him and says, "Welcome to Lanling, Young Master Wei."

~

After settling into their rooms, there's dinner. Most of the disciples get to eat in a lower hall with each other, but of course those of certain title are expected to eat in the main hall.

Wei Wuxian does try to get out of this one, saying it's not even a formal banquet, but Jiang Cheng just grabs him by the back of his robes and hauls him along, squawking the whole way while A-jie tries and fails to scold them through her laughter.

Of course they've barely stepped into the main hall when Wei Wuxian shouts, "Lan Zhan!"

"Wei Wuxian," he hisses, but of course his brother's already gone, crossing the main hall to drape himself over Lan Wangji in a way that reminds him of Nie Huaisang. Lan Wangji doesn't remove his hands from behind his back, but he does smile, with his mouth and everything, in public where everyone can see him.

"Gross," he mutters.

“They are kind of nauseating, aren’t they?”

He turns and grins, clapping Nie Mingjue on the shoulder. He’s got a new blade across his back, this one even wider than Baxia. He thinks it might even be a proper broadsword.

He takes a moment to consider that much of the time he’d known Nie Mingjue he’d been a little bit dying and had a blade that had been draining and fighting him even when it hadn’t want to. And now he doesn’t. It looks like Wei Wuxian is going to have some competition for the most terrifying cultivator. The idea that the strong and powerful Nie Mingjue had been handicapped this whole time is awe inspiring. And it makes him really glad he and the Nie are allies this time around. “It’s the fucking worst,” he says frankly even as A-jie gives him a disapproving look that doesn’t really do much considering her smile. “Hi, Nie Huaisang.” He’s a little surprised to see him here, since he doesn’t think he’d attended last time. Maybe since Nie Mingjue isn’t as worried about dying young this time he’s also less worried about trying to keep his younger brother’s weak cultivation a secret. Which is probably for the best, since everyone already knows.

He waves from behind his fan, then says, “Brother, Madame Jin is looking at us.”

Nie Mingjue sighs then turns to A-jie. He says, “Lady Jiang, it’s lovely to see you again,” and leans down to delicately kiss her cheek. Her smile is amused and fond, very much like Jiang Cheng has seen her look at him and Wei Wuxian a time or thousand.

Jiang Cheng’s pretty sure he feels the loss of air in the room as everyone gasps and that’s definitely the sound of Wei Wuxian laughing. He knows everyone is probably looking at his face for his reaction and he tries to look like this is completely normal and not like he wants to turn around and stick his tongue out at Jin Zixuan. “Oh, that’s really going to kickstart the rumor mill.”

“Wait,” Nie Huaisang says, practically vibrating.

Jiang Cheng is instantly suspicious.

“Sect Leader Jiang,” Lan Xichen greets sedately, suddenly right there and not next to his brother anymore. Jiang Cheng can’t blame him. If he was next to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji being disgusting, he’d leave too. “Sect Leader Nie. Young Master Nie.” He pauses, then says slightly louder, “Lady Jiang,” and bends down just enough to press a kiss to her other cheek.

A-jie is surprised but pleased. Jiang Cheng doesn’t sigh, but only because everyone is looking at them. “Nie Huaisang, really?”

“Just trying to help,” he sing songs from behind his fan.

A-jie giggles and steps forward, pressing a hand on both Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue’s forearms so she can stand on her tiptoes, just like she does with him and Wei Wuxian, and kiss each of their cheeks in turn. They look a little stunned about it, probably because neither of them have a sister. “It’s good to see that both of you are well.”

“Shijie!” Wei Wuxian calls out, and Jiang Cheng knows he’s trying to sound scandalized but mostly he sounds delighted, so it doesn’t really work. He strides across the main hall and says to them, “Stop hogging my sister, it’s very inconsiderate.”

“A-Xian,” she says, but doesn’t resist as he leads her back over to Lan Wangji. He gives her the deepest bow he’s seen Lan Wangji give anyone and then offers her his seat.

Jiang Cheng chances a look around. The Jin and the minor sects look like their wine has been replaced with vinegar. Well. Jin Zixuan actually looks kind of wistful, which is new. Or isn’t. He really hadn’t been paying attention to Jin Zixuan’s face last time around. Jin Guangyao’s face is carefully blank, and he doesn’t know how to interpret that. Nie Mingjue probably would, but he doesn’t ask, for obvious reasons.

“You’re feeling really proud of yourself, aren’t you?” he asks Nie Huaisang.

He snaps his fan shut and goes over to talk to Wei Wuxian instead of answering him.

“Your brother’s a menace,” he says to Nie Mingjue

“Mm,” he says agreeably, then, “Congratulations on your ascension, Sect Leader Lan.”

“Thank you,” he says, and his eyes are twinkling. “It was planned, but I didn’t have much of a choice after telling Uncle of Wangji’s engagement. He was quite ...surprised.”

“That must have been terrible,” Jiang Cheng says, but he says it in a way that kind of sounds like he wishes he’d been there to see it.

The first time they’d been here, Madame Jin had absconded with A-jie the second she’d seen her and he and Wei Wuxian had sat close enough their elbows kept bumping into one another and neither had moved away, backs straight and their faces stiff.

This is better.

~

Last time they’d come to the crowd hunt, the only disciple the Jiang Clan had submitted to the archery competition had been Wei Wuxian.

They hadn’t brought that many disciples to begin with, having lost so many between the attack on Lotus Pier and the last battle of the Sunshot Campaign that their options had been limited, especially considering it’d just been him doing the recruiting last time, what with Wei Wuxian being an alcoholic mess and him not willing to have A-jie travel Yunmeng alone. They’d needed to leave behind someone at least somewhat senior behind to run Lotus Pier since all three of them were gone, and their presence at the crowd hunt had been – well, not impressive, to say the least, and they hadn’t been able to bring anyone who could hope to place in an archery competition consisting of the best of each sect. Anyone who could have had been someone they’d needed to leave behind to look over Lotus Pier, since obviously leaving a bunch of half-trained disciples to look after their home would have been too foolish to even contemplate. So instead they’d brought the half-trained disciples with them. They’d

been considering not going at all until Jin Zixuan had come by to invite A-jie personally and forced their hand.

It's why Wei Wuxian had used his demonic cultivation to capture thirty percent of the prey last time. It had ended up causing problems, because of course it did, but the intention had been good. It had been Wei Wuxian reminding everyone that what they lacked with numbers they made up for in power. His, specifically. His brother had been trying to protect them by showing that they weren't vulnerable, that even if they *looked* vulnerable and Wei Wuxian was walking around half dead, he was still the person that ended the war in a single day and if anyone thought to take advantage of the Jiang clan then he'd end them too.

It had backfired spectacularly. Sometimes Jiang Cheng had wondered if it was one of the reasons Wei Wuxian had left, if he'd felt that instead of helping like he'd wanted, he was just making everything worse by being around.

He had made things worse. His good intentions had gone poorly because everyone seemed to forget how terrifyingly powerful his brother was until they felt the need to vilify him. But Jiang Cheng isn't foolish enough to deny that the Yilling Patriarch's reputation had protected them even when he was all the way in the Burial Mounds, no matter the supposed animosity that Jiang Cheng had said existed between them.

The Jiang disciples had still called him Senior Brother Wei after his banishment, after all.

None of that matters now, though. Their numbers are higher than ever. They'd left Wang Yan behind to run Lotus Pier in their absence and brought a dozen high ranking disciples to make a good show of it and just as many who could really use the experience of a crowd hunt and hopefully wouldn't do anything too embarrassing. Li Jun had been tasked with wrangling the younger cultivators. He's pretty sure that's the closest the man has ever gotten to cursing at him.

Wei Wuxian isn't the only spot of purple on the field of the archery range this time. He's standing apart from the rest of them so he can stand in front with his fiancé, but honestly Jiang Cheng would have been surprised if he'd done anything else. Nie Zonghui is on his other side, which shouldn't be that unusual, considering Baxia at Wei Wuxian's back, but Jiang Cheng feels a hint of suspicion anyway, an instinct that he's pretty sure comes more from being Wei Wuxian's brother than from being a clan leader.

Madame Jin is crossing in front of them with some of the other Jin ladies and their attendants along with A-jie. Last time, Wei Wuxian had waved at her like a little kid until she'd looked at him and hid her smile behind her fan.

This time, as soon as A-jie walks in front of them, Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and Nie Zonghui bend into a neat bow, something they'd obviously planned. She stops, her eyes widening, and a beat later all the Jiang, Lan, and Nie disciples do the same, following the lead of their respective first disciples. She flushes and hides her lower face behind her fan before inclining her head and continuing after Madame Jin, who's smile is more than a little strained. They don't straighten until A-jie has taken her seat next to Madame Jin.

He turns to glare, but both Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen seem surprised, although not upset. He risks a glance in the other direction and Jin Guangyao looks amused, although his face goes back to blandly pleasant when his father looks his way. Jiang Cheng doesn't know how much of that is genuine, or if any of it is.

"Lady Jiang did so much for us during the war," Lan Xichen says, who really has a lot of nerve for calling him and his siblings troublemakers considering he's the one who keeps opening his mouth and politely saying things he probably shouldn't. "We all grew so fond of her."

"Of course," Jin Guangshan says with a smile that looks like it hurts a little bit.

Yes, wedding negotiations seems as if they'll go *much* smoother this time around.

Jin Guangyao announces his special treat for them the same as he had before, leading out the beaten and starved Wen in chains. He's already turned his head to glare Wei Wuxian into submission, skipping the part where he stares at them in shock, which means he sees Lan Xichen look down and away. Which shouldn't mean anything at all, except he's seen that body language before, and his eyes flit back to Jin Guangyao without thinking. He makes a note of Nie Huaisang doing the same thing and tries not to read too much into it.

Jin Guangyao is looking at Lan Xichen. Who had just done the same thing he'd done to Jiang Cheng when he'd felt ashamed he couldn't promise to control the Lan. When he'd known Jiang Cheng had wanted his help but he couldn't give it.

Lan Wangji is holding onto Wei Wuxian, thankfully, which means Jiang Cheng is free to tune all this out and think.

Why would Jin Guangyao do this? Why had he brought out the abused Wen for them to see? It had pissed everyone off before, and it's doing the same thing now. Nie Huaisang is pressed up against his older brother's side and he's pretty sure it's to keep Nie Mingjue from throttling Jin Guangshan. The Nie had done what they'd felt they needed to do in the war, but they weren't needlessly cruel, and certainly didn't take any pleasure in cruelty. The minor sects might be pleased to see the people who'd attacked their homes in chains, but at the very least Clan Leader Ouyang was respectable enough to be put off by it. It could be a power play, to show the Jin were so powerful they could be publicly terrible with no consequences, except by his own admission this had been Jin Guangyao's idea and he didn't do that kind of loud, pointless display.

Maybe it wasn't to make the Jin to look good.

Maybe it was to make them look bad. Maybe he was flaunting the atrocities the Jin were committing because he couldn't do something about it but he thought that someone should. Lan Xichen, for all that he was a formidable warrior, was gentle too. He loved Jin Guangyao, and if he'd thought Jin Guangyao was the type of person to keep war prisoners as slaves and then brag about it, he wouldn't love him. But he had. Probably he does. Which means whatever is happening, it can't be that.

Lan Xichen had looked away just now as if he were ashamed. Possibly because Jin Guangyao is asking for his help, is asking him to do something about this, and he doesn't think he can.

"I'll go, it's not that hard," Jin Zixuan scoffs, stepping forward immediately, just like last time. He doesn't look surprised to see the Wens or at the state of them. He hadn't been surprised last time either.

Jin Zixuan's response had been something that impressed Jiang Cheng the first time around. By going first and doing it so well, while proclaiming that it was easy, he was making sure that anyone who wasn't certain that they could do the same would hesitate to even attempt it, less they embarrass themselves. It had been his way of protecting the Wens standing there as much as he could without making a scene of it. It's why Wei Wuxian had done the same, pulling off a move so impressive that no one would *dare* follow him. Which, of course, had pissed everyone off, but it means the only people who'd shot in the archery competition had been people skilled enough not to hit any of the Wens standing there.

Jiang Cheng had thought it an unexpected bit of cleverness from Jin Zixuan. But maybe it had never been *his* cleverness at all.

He hadn't been surprised. He'd reacted instantly. Like he'd know what to expect. Like it was planned.

Jin Guangyao stands there and smiles even as Wei Wuxian does the same as before, shooting five arrows perfectly while blindfolded. Jiang Cheng claps with everyone else, but this time he's looking at Jin Zixuan. Who's trying to scowl, but by the way he rolls back his shoulders, is relieved despite the humiliation. He'd done that last time too, another point in his favor, because Jiang Cheng had liked that he'd cared more about people not getting his hurt than his pride. That's still true this time around

Cared about them so much, maybe, that he'd conspired with his bastard half brother to both expose his family's dirty laundry, something he hates more than possibly anything, and to make sure the Wen would survive the experience. It probably hadn't hurt that it had given him an excuse to show off in front of A-jie, he tries to think uncharitably, but honestly he's too impressed.

Maybe the Nie Huaisang of his time had been right. Maybe there's something redeemable here in Jin Guangyao. He's sure there's a dozen reasons and ways this benefits him, or could benefit him, but he's still doing it. Bringing the Wen out had been a risk. If they did cause a fuss, but then let it go, Jin Guangshan would surely take his anger out on him, but Jin Guangyao is making this specific play, one that could help others as well as himself instead of the one that only helps himself.

Jiang Cheng just doesn't understand how Jin Guangyao's fall could have happened. He'd never paid attention to him before so he doesn't have much basis for comparison, but Nie Mingjue isn't an idiot. When Jin Guangyao had changed, he'd noticed, and long before anyone else. Maybe he was just picking up on what had always been there, but also maybe he *wasn't*, maybe Jin Guangyao had always been clever and manipulative and self serving, but hadn't always been cruel and mad and power hungry to the point of leaving behind everything else.

Had it been the war? Had he snapped? Nie Mingjue had thrown Jin Guangyao out of his clan when he'd killed one of his disciples, claiming he'd tried to let Xue Yang escape.

Jin Guangyao is directing everyone to the forest but Jiang Cheng can barely focus on that, and he catches A-jie's concerned look as he gets to his feet but he can't even bring himself to smile at her.

Jin Guangyao had killed the Nie disciple after conversing with Xue Yang.

*Fuck.*

Xue Yang who had the last piece of the Yin Iron. Xue Yang who was himself cruel and mad. Could Jin Guangyao have gotten the Yin Iron from him then?

Could that be why?

Yin Iron corrupts the body and the mind. Wei Wuxian had struggled with it, but had never seemed to lose himself to it, and this time around those struggles barely seemed noticeable. That didn't mean it was easy, because Jiang Cheng is sure his brother is doing his best to hide any difficulty he's having from all of them, but he'd tried last time too. And he hadn't been able to, it'd been too much for him to hide, and this time it isn't, and that shouldn't be comforting but it really is.

Jin Guangyao was not Wei Wuxian.

He wasn't as strong, didn't have any skills with demonic cultivation so he couldn't channel the resentful energy out of him, and he hadn't been a cultivator of any strength before being exposed to it. The first time he'd touched Yin Iron, he'd killed a Nie cultivator, and even if it'd been one who'd always been rude to Jin Guangyao, it had been sloppy and uncharacteristic and the moment Nie Mingjue had looked at him he'd known something had changed.

They'd long accepted that Wen Ruohan had been driven even more mad by his use of Yin Iron. What if Jin Guangyao had been too?

What if that's what had tipped the scales from manipulative to monstrous?

"Jiang Cheng," Nie Mingjue mutters, "what's wrong?"

Lan Xichen is walking with Jin Guangyao, their heads bent together and a smile on both of their faces that looks real. Wei Wuxian is already out of sight, probably to go kiss Lan Wangji and not do any actual hunting,

"Nothing," he says. Nie Huaisang snorts and he amends, "I need to talk to my brother about something."

If anyone will know how to be able to tell, it'll be Wei Wuxian. If there's anyone who'll be able to get the Yin Iron away from him, it'll be Wei Wuxian.

He fucking hates that he's about to shove a problem at his brother and ask him to fix it.

Well. If he's going to do that, then he's going to do the original part of his plan on his own, even though objectively he knows it's going to go fucking horribly.

"Nie Huaisang," he says, and whatever is in his voice makes Nie Huaisang's eyes narrow before he hides behind his fan. "How about you and I duck out for a little bit and go on a little adventure?"

This had all been Nie Huaisang's idea anyway, not that he knows that now, obviously. The least he can do is help him out with it.

Nie Mingjue raises an eyebrow. "I want my brother in one piece, Jiang Cheng."

"He'll stay in one," he promises. "Hm, Nie Huaisang, what do you say?"

"Do I get to know what this adventure is?" he asks warily. "Also shouldn't you stay and supervise your disciples?"

"No," he says, answering both questions. "Li Jun will handle it."

He hums then snaps his fan shut, tapping it against his chin before saying, "Alright, Sect Leader Jiang, let's go on an adventure."

It's a sign of how much Nie Mingjue trusts him that when Jiang Cheng grabs the back of Nie Huaisang's robe and drags him away, all he does is laugh.

~

When they show up at a high end brothel, Nie Huaisang knows him far too well to be anything but suspicious. "What are we doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No," he says, with very judgmental eyebrows.

Fair enough. Jiang Cheng's never been to a brothel in his life. "I'm looking for someone."

"A wayward disciple?" Nie Huaisang tries.

He shakes his head. "Meng Yanmei." Or Shi, depending.

Nie Huaisang grabs his forearm, the grip tight enough that it might have even bruised if Jiang Cheng wasn't a cultivator. He's completely serious, which Jiang Cheng has only seen glimpses of, and only after he'd approached him about traveling back in time. Seeing it now on a much younger face is disconcerting. "Why?"

"Jin Guangyao is dangerous," he says, surprised that Nie Huaisang knows the name of Jin Guangyao's mother, even though he can't really say why. Nie Huaisang only nods. Dangerous and enemy are, of course, not synonyms. They're all dangerous in their way. "Jin Guangshan keeps him in check by holding the possibility of buying his mother's freedom over his head."



“How do you know that?” Nie Huaisang demands.

“People talk,” he says, because of course he doesn’t have a real answer for that. Nie Huaisang frowns, as if trying to figure out how Jiang Cheng could have heard a rumor that he hadn’t. “The point is, if Jin Guangyao is going to be dangerous, I don’t want him to feel like he has to be dangerous *for* Jin Guangshan.”

Also, they’d thought maybe it was his mother’s fate that had broken Jin Guangyao. The first time around she’d been killed by a client before Jin Guangyao had been able to free her. Now, Jiang Cheng is pretty sure it’d been the influence of the Yin Iron, but his mother’s death probably hadn’t helped.

“Jiang Cheng,” he says, torn between horrified and delighted, “are we here so you can buy a prostitute?”

He grimaces. “Yes, but please don’t say it like that. This is Jin Guangyao’s mother, after all.”

That sucks the of the glee out of him and he nods solemnly. “Am I here because you don’t know anything about brothels and you don’t want to make a fool of yourself?”

He grits his teeth but nods. It’s bad enough that he’s going to be seen going into a place like this, he doesn’t need to be embarrassed in both directions.

“I don’t know if I should be flattered or not,” he says, even though he obviously *is* flattered either way.

“Have a lot of experience buying prostitutes?” he asks.

Nie Huaisang doesn’t deny it and he narrows his eyes. It’s equally likely that he has and that he hasn’t but he’s trying to freak Jiang Cheng out. He refuses to give Nie Huaisang the satisfaction.

Given that they are obviously both cultivators and very rich, the madame approaches them immediately, a wide, friendly smile on her face. That smile drops when Nie Huaisang tells her why they’re there.

“Meng Yanmei is not available for sale,” she tells them. “If you’d like her for a night, or to purchase one of our other girls-”

“No,” Nie Huaisang says, raising an eyebrow. “We want Meng Yanmei. What is her debt to you? We will pay it.”

“Her debt is not available for sale,” she insists.

Jiang Cheng lets Zidian spark up his arm. Nie Huaisang sighs but the madame flinches away from them. “Let me be perfectly clear. We are leaving with Meng Yanmei. Whether that’s because you’ve accepted our money or because I’ve brought the local magistrate here to shut this place down is up to you.”

“He won’t,” she says, but her voice is shaking. Jiang Cheng almost feels bad about it. “He won’t and I can’t sell Meng Yanmei to you.”

Nie Huaisang’s eyes narrow and he snaps his fan out. “You seem awfully sure about that. Is it perhaps because Clan Leader Jin is protecting you from the law? Has he forbidden you from selling Meng Yanmei?”

It can’t be healthy for someone to turn so pale so quickly. It’s all the answer they need.

“Do you know who we are?” Jiang Cheng asks.

She shakes her head.

“I am Nie Huaisang, the heir to the Nie sect,” he says from behind his fan.

“And I am Clan Leader Jiang,” he says. Now the rest of her is shaking. She knows that no matter Jin Guangshan’s promise, he won’t bother standing against the Nie and Jiang sects to protect her. “You will sell Meng Yanmei to us.”

“Yes,” she agrees.

After handing over a frankly disgusting amount of money and arranging for one of his disciples to come and pick up the rest of her things, he’s given a copy of her contract with the house, her debt which seems full of overblown charges, and a receipt showing that her debt has been paid off. No wonder that Jin Guangyao hadn’t been able to afford her freedom even after several years as one of Nie Mingjue’s generals.

Meng Yanmei is finally brought out to them and the way Nie Huaisang covers nearly his entire face with his fan is very telling. He must see the same thing that Jiang Cheng does.

“Miss Meng,” he says, realizing his voice is coming out too cold and too sharp but unable to stop it, “are you a cultivator?”

“I am not, master,” she says, eyes downcast.

Now he’s the one flinching. “Don’t call me that.”

She nods, her face still downturned.

It doesn’t do much to hide her looks. She’s beautiful, of course, Jin Guangyao hadn’t exactly gotten his delicate features from his father, and her clothing is high quality if a little too telling of her profession, but that’s not what they’re upset about.

“Follow me,” he says, voice tight, and leaves without a backwards glance. Meng Yanmei and Nie Huaisang walk behind him and they’re halfway back to the Jin estate before he’s cooled off enough to turn to her and demand, “How old were you?”

She’s young *now*. Her face isn’t covered in powder and is unlined. Jin Guangyao is almost twenty.

“My lord?” she says tentatively, her face still downturned.

“Look at me,” he snaps.

She lifts her head, meeting his eyes. Her manner is soft and yielding and her dark eyes are anything but. “He comes by it honestly, then,” he says. He supposes people might interpret the fire in her eyes as passion, if that’s what they’re looking for there, but Jiang Cheng recognizes rage when he sees it.

“Who, my lord?” she asks, voice light and melodic, with an unassuming lilt to it that he’s heard so often before.

He should probably be careful here. It’s occurring to him for the first time that he’s looking at the woman who raised Jin Guangyao.

“Your son,” he says. “How old were you when you gave birth to your son? How old are you now?”

“I’m thirty six, my lord,” she says. Zidian sparks again but she doesn’t even bother to glance at it.

“So you were seventeen when you had him,” he says grimly. “I suppose it’s too much to hope that you were seventeen when you conceived him.” Not that that’s much better of course.

She raises an eyebrow, and oh, he’s definitely seen that look before. He gets the impression that this woman’s mind has been wasted in her current work. “Did Sect Leader Jin not tell you about me before sending you to retrieve me?”

“Sect Leader Jin?” he demands. “Who said anything about him? Do you think the Nie and Jiang run errands for the Jin?”

That’s genuine surprise that flickers across her face. “So I’m a power play then? I will look very nice on your arm.”

His face goes hot and Nie Huaisang laughs at him. “No! Can you stop saying horrible things? Fuck.” He reaches into his robes and hands her the papers, her contract and debt and the receipt. “Here. Stop calling me my lord too, if you’re going to be weird about it. I’m Sect Leader Jiang.”

She looks down at the papers then back up at him. “Sect Leader Jiang,” she says, and she sounds genuine for the first time, voice hard and a little bit wonderous at once. “I do not understand. Explain it to me.”

“Your son terrifies me,” he says. Nie Huaisang looks surprised at that, but she doesn’t. Probably because she’s the one who taught him to be terrifying. “I neither like nor trust Jin Guangshan, but whatever he is, he’s worse with your son supporting him. Part of the reason he supports him is because of you, so I want to take you out of the equation.”

“You paid an awful lot of money to kill me,” she says calmly, as if the thought doesn’t upset her at all.

He wants to yank at his hair in frustration. “No one’s going to kill you!”

“If you’re not going to fuck me and you’re not going to kill me, then what are you going to do with me?” she asks with that same calm. Actually, no, this one’s a little worse because she almost sounds amused.

“Nothing!” he snaps, then reconsiders. “Well. You can stay here, if you want, but I don’t think I have to tell you how bad of an idea that is. You’re welcome to come back to Yunmeng with us. You’re clever and young, you’ll be able to find work. Or if you prefer to stay in your current profession, there are pleasure houses everywhere.”

She’s still watching him. “You fear my son so much you paid a small fortune to get me away from Jin Guangshan. Don’t you want to use me as he used me? As collateral against what you can’t control?”

“I thought I told you to stop saying horrible things,” he mutters, ignoring the subtle emphasis she’d added on used because technically speaking he is older than her and he refuses to be embarrassed. “I want any horribleness your son engages in to be entirely of his own choosing, not forced on him by his asshole father. You’re holding the proof of your freedom in your hands. You don’t need me or anything I have to offer. But it’s not like I *asked* before freeing you, so it would be rude of me not to offer you assistance. If you would like to accompany us back to Lotus Pier you may. But you don’t have to. I request you stay with the Jiangs until you decide so we can protect you. If you’re worried about our ability to keep you safe or out of sight while in Carp Tower, you may choose an inn to stay at and I’ll send two of my senior cultivators to guard you.”

She looks at him for a long time and he just meets her gaze solidly. He doesn’t have anything to hide. Well, not about this, not to her.

“Thank you, Sect Leader Jiang,” she says finally. “I will accompany you back to the tower. I haven’t seen my son in many years.”

“He doesn’t visit?” he asks, thrown by that. His mother’s so close now.

“He writes,” she says. “Jin Guangshan doesn’t allow his disciples to visit pleasure houses and before he was Jin, he was all the way in the Unclean Realms.” The hypocrisy there is so astounding that he thinks he might be gaping. Her eyes flicker to the side, looking Nie Huaisang over and her eyes catching on his fan. “He spoke fondly of you, Nie Huaisang.”

“You as well, Miss Meng,” he says, and slips his fan into his sleeve to offer her his arm.

She takes it with a demure twist to her mouth that has to be fake.

Jiang Cheng kind of hates the fact that they don’t look totally ridiculous.

~

Of course as soon as they step back onto Jin land, one of his disciples is telling him that something is going on in the forest and he should hurry.

He almost groans out loud. He'd really thought they'd manage to avoid this fiasco this time around. Wei Wuxian hadn't caught thirty percent of the prey this time, he doesn't think. He'd honestly be surprised if he'd caught *anything* and hadn't just found someplace quiet where Lan Wangji could take liberties with him. "Nie Huaisang," he starts.

"I'll stay with her," he says. "Go, take care of it, whatever it is."

He grumbles all the way there, flying on his sword and then walking briskly the rest of the way. He comes upon a situation that isn't all that different than the one he'd arrived at last time. A-jie is standing in front of Wei Wuxian while uncharacteristically glaring at Jin Zixun. Lan Wangji is holding onto Wei Wuxian's arm. Madame Jin has a strained smile and Jin Zixuan isn't looking at any of them. Clan Leader Yao is saying something idiotic. What's different this time is Wei Wuxian isn't crying or furious, instead he looks faintly embarrassed and even a little exasperated, and Lan Wangji looks like he's about two seconds from unsheathing Bichen. Mianmian is standing next to Jin Zixuan. Nie Mingjue is there, giving Jin Zixun a highly unimpressed look and there are several handfuls of disciples surrounding them from every clan. Jin Guangyao is standing back next to Lan Xichen instead of getting involved, which probably means that Wei Wuxian didn't use his flute to capture prey, since he doesn't feel the need to smooth anything over.

He walks up to them and murmurs, "What did I miss?"

Jin Guangyao doesn't move but Lan Xichen startles. "Ah, Jiang Cheng. Um."

"Why is A-jie pissed?" Actually, he already knows the answer to that, and he doesn't need any context from either this timeline or the last one. "Who was mean to our brother?"

"You will apologize to A-Xian," A-jie orders, her voice carrying over the forest and saving Lan Xichen from answering.

Jin Zixun scoffs. Wei Wuxian tugs at A-jie's sleeve like a little kid. It's a strange role reversal from the camp when A-jie had tried to tug Wei Wuxian away after he'd punched Jin Zixuan in the face. "Shijie, Shijie, it's okay. Come and finish your walk with me and Lan Zhan, hm? We won't say rude things to you like Jin Zixuan."

Jin Zixuan just looks mortified and Wei Wuxian is almost teasing, so probably this time Jin Zixuan managed to keep from saying anything truly hurtful and probably just said something thoughtless.

"Jiang Yanli, really, let's not get involved," Madame Jin coaxes.

"Wei Wuxian is my brother," she says clearly. "If he is disrespected, then so am I. I am already involved."

Madame Jin is disappointed but she turns to Jin Zixun. "Well? You heard her."

"You're joking," Jin Zixun sneers. If anyone had ever spoken to his mother like that they would have been lucky if she only pulled a sword on them, but none of the Jin even react to some disciple talking like that to the clan leader's wife. The Jin better be willing to change

their tune quickly if they don't want A-jie taking their heir back to Lotus Pier where people actually listen to her. "All this, over him? He's just the son of a servant, you might as well feed him to the dogs-"

Jiang Cheng doesn't make a conscious decision to move except one moment he's next to Lan Xichen and the next he's standing in front of Jin Zixun with his sword pressed against his throat. "What did you say?" he asks softly, letting Sandu fall just enough to draw blood. "Won't you repeat it for me?"

"Clan Leader Jiang!" Madame Jin shouts. "What are you doing?"

"Ah, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian says, pressing a hand against his shoulder. Jiang Cheng risks a glance over at him. He's pale, probably at the mention of dogs, but doesn't look upset. He should. He should be upset about this. "There, there, no need to be hasty. I am the son of a servant, after all."

"He said just," A-jie says angrily. "You are not just the son of servant, A-Xian."

It's a sign of how beyond pissed their sister is that she's not trying to calm him down or stop him.

"You can't be serious," Jin Zixun says, because clearly he wants very badly for Jiang Cheng to kill him. "Are you really going to try and say he's part of the main family? Everyone knows Madame Yu hated him and Jiang Fengmian only took him in out of guilt, like a stray dog. A pet dog is not a family member, Jiang Cheng."

There's no way to order Jin Zixun to stop talking about dogs without looking like a lunatic, but he wants to.

He pulls his sword back just to turn it around and slam the hilt of it into Jin Zixun's face, breaking his nose and probably fracturing his cheekbone as well. He shouts as he topples over, raising a hand over his face, but thankfully stays down. "What the fuck do my parents feelings matter? Did you think when A-jie and I called him our brother that it was a joke? He's our brother. It doesn't matter whether our parents hated him or loved him. You have a lot of fucking nerve speaking to the heir of another sect like this."

There's a ripple of gasps throughout the crowd that he doesn't understand at all. "You're making him your *heir*?" Jin Zixun spits.

Confusion cuts through some of his anger. "He's the heir to the Jiang Clan now. He has been ever since my father died and I took the place as Clan Leader. Did you think he accompanied me to war meetings and led our people in battle as the son of servant?"

He looks over to A-jie to see if this makes anymore sense to her than it does him, but his eyes get caught on Wei Wuxian.

His eyes are wide and his mouth is open before he visibly remembers to shut in and then swallows. He seems just as surprised as everyone else. How is this possible? How could Wei

Wuxian not have known? Who *else* would it have been? Why did he think that he was the one Jiang Cheng always turned to first to help manage the sect in both timelines?

“Clan Leader Jiang,” Madame Jin says delicately, “usually such appointments are announced with an official letter.”

A-jie frowns. “That’s only if it falls out of direct lines of inheritance. Wei Wuxian *is* our brother. He’s listed as such in our official clan archives. It shouldn’t have needed to be announced.”

“Oh, stop this,” Clan Leader Yao says. “Clan Leader Jiang can name whoever he’d like as his heir, no matter how unsuitable, but don’t pretend as if this is some old news we should have known.”

There are some mutterings of assent and this is all exhausting and ridiculous and he doesn’t have it in him to try and be diplomatic. “Wei Wuxian is stronger, smarter, and better than all of you. You try and hide your jealousy as indignation or fear, but you’re shit at it. There’s no one else I’d rather have as my heir or my brother. But even if he wasn’t, even if he was dumb and blind and couldn’t cultivate to save his life, none of that would matter. He’d still be my brother and he’d still be the heir to the Jiang Clan.”

He can feel the weight of his brother’s stare on him but doesn’t dare try and meet it.

Clan Leader Yao is turning red he’s so mad. Usually Jiang Cheng could find some amusement in that, but not now. “If he was truly your brother, then he wouldn’t be your heir, he’d be Clan Leader and you would be *his* heir. Everyone knows Jiang Clan succession goes to the oldest male first.”

More people are nodding and Jiang Cheng can’t believe this is happening to him. “Fuck, you’re all so stupid. In the Jiang sect it goes by gender then birth order, not age, morons.” Even that wasn’t set in stone, of course. It was more a guideline. Historically speaking, the Jiang weren’t great at following any rules, including their own.

“What’s the difference?” Mianmian asks quickly, probably trying to cut off someone else saying something to piss him off. “Between age and birth order?”

“Wei Wuxian wasn’t brought into our family until we were children,” he says, forcing some of the anger out of his voice because it’s Mianmian who’s asked. “He’s my older brother, but I’m the first born son, which is why I was the Jiang Sect heir.” If his mother hadn’t had a son when his father had brought Wei Wuxian home, she probably wouldn’t have allowed it, but there’s no use focusing on that because it’s not what happened. Neither of his parents had ever used the term son to describe Wei Wuxian, but that doesn’t matter either. His name is besides his and A-jie’s in the official books and *that* is all the matters. “He’s considered the second born son because he joined us after I was born. If my mother had another boy after Wei Wuxian joined us, then that child would have been a third born son and behind Wei Wuxian in the succession. There’s no game here. Wei Wuxian is my brother and my heir.”

A-jie steps forward, something that’s almost a snarl curling around her lips as she looks down at Jin Zixun. “You insulted my brother. Apologize.”

There's a thick, tense silence, and then Jin Zixuan opens his mouth. Jiang Cheng is prepared for something terrible, but instead what he gets is, "Do as she says."

"Jin Zixuan?" Jin Zixun looks uncertain for the first time.

"Do as Lady Jiang says," Jin Zixuan repeats. "If she chooses to join our clan, you'll have to obey her. You might as well get the practice in now."

It seems like Jin Zixuan isn't a total idiot and has figured out that A-jie isn't going to be the kind of wife that his mother is. Good. Maybe he *won't* have to kidnap his sister away from the Jin for under appreciating her.

Jin Zixun gets to his feet, his face and front covered in blood, and stiffly gives a shallow bow to Wei Wuxian.

"Lower," A-jie snaps.

He takes a deep, steadying breath, but obediently lowers himself into something approaching the proper amount of deference. "I apologize."

"I accept," Wei Wuxian says quickly, eyes wide. He steps forward to tug on A-jie's sleeve again. "Shijie, won't you walk with me and Lan Zhan?"

Her anger has melted away and her smile is soft. "Of course I will, A-Xian."

"Well?" Jiang Cheng growls at the surrounding cultivators. "Don't you all have a hunt to get back to?"

The Jiang disciples start herding the other disciples away, with sharp, cheerful movements. Madame Jin looks between them, opens her mouth, and then seems to think better of it and walks back towards the tower, two Jin disciples and Jin Guangyao falling in step behind her. Mianmian even trails after Jin Zixun with minimal sighing when Jin Zixuan tells her to. Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue catch his eye to smile at him and Wei Wuxian before giving them shallow bows and heading off in the same direction together. They seem to still be friends this time around, even with Lan Xichen's obvious friendship with Jin Guangyao. Jiang Cheng's not sure which of the changes has led to that, but he's grateful for it. It'll make things easier for all of them later.

"Jin Zixuan," he says, because he's still here. Jin Zixuan straightens and lifts his chin. Part of him hates this, but, well, he had made his cousin listen to A-jie, and that's important. "Will you accompany my sister back to the tower?"

"Jiang Cheng!" Wei Wuxian gasps, but he doesn't sound really angry.

Jin Zixuan flushes and gives a shallow bow. "I would like that very much. Lady Jiang?"

"If my brother doesn't mind," she answers, looking at Wei Wuxian.

He huffs, but says, "Not alone. You need a chaperone. Where did Mianmian go?"



That's pretty rich coming from Wei Wuxian, who'd been notorious for disappearing with his fiancé long before they got engaged and certainly hasn't stopped since, but he doesn't point it out because that's perfect, actually. "Lan Wangji, will you accompany my sister and Jin Zixuan? I want to talk to my brother for a moment."

Lan Wangji inclines his head while Wei Wuxian starts to look nervous. Lan Wangji hesitates then leans forward enough to press a quick kiss to the ridge of Wei Wuxian's cheekbone. "You'll explain your reaction to him saying dogs later?" he asks, quietly enough that Jiang Cheng thinks he's not supposed to be able to hear him.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian says, grimacing. "Yes. Later."

Lan Wangji nods, stepping back so A-jie can kiss Wei Wuxian's cheek as well, then he trails behind Jin Zixuan and A-jie far enough away that they can pretend to have some privacy but not so far away that he can't hear them speaking, clearly taking his role as chaperone seriously.

Jiang Cheng waits until they're out of sight to push Wei Wuxian towards the nearest tree stump. "Here, sit down and don't move."

"Bossy," he grumbles, but does as he's told for once. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up," he says instead of answering. He stands behind his brother and lifts Baxia off his back and hands it to him before undoing the ribbon holding his hair up. He runs his hand through it, trying to finger comb it so it looks at least slightly presentable. This will be easier if they don't have to look at each other, he thinks. "Why did *you* look surprised when I said you were my heir? You've seen the books yourself and it's not like you're not doing the work." Even the last time, when he was disappearing all the time, he'd still done the work of an heir when he could, when he was around and sober, which, granted, hadn't been often.

"You never said it out loud before."

Hadn't he? He couldn't remember. "I didn't think I needed to."

Wei Wuxian is quiet for a long moment as Jiang Cheng works out the knots in his hair. He sighs. "I just, I know, but, I thought that – I thought that maybe you were just waiting for someone better. Someone more qualified to take my place."

"Like who?" he retorts. "There's no one more qualified. You're not a placeholder." He pauses in combing Wei Wuxian's hair to take out his own, his hair falling neatly over his shoulders because he actually takes the time to take care of it. "I don't know why you'd think that."

In either timeline, but *especially* in this one.

Wei Wuxian hesitates, but says, "Your father put me in the family books, but he never expected me to be the heir."

Jiang Cheng shrugs. "Yeah, I mean, he probably figured I'd have some kids of my own by the time he handed it over. So what?"

He's quiet again. "I don't want to say something that will make you think less of your father. He was a good man and I loved him."

His stomach rolls and he bites the inside of his cheek until blood fills his mouth. "Tell me."

"It doesn't matter, I shouldn't have said anything."

Wei Wuxian tries to turn to face him but Jiang Cheng grabs him by the shoulders and firmly turns him back around. He starts gathering his brother's hair in his hands. "Tell me."

"Didn't you ever wonder why your mother hated me so much?"

That is possibly the last thing he expected his brother to say. "She – she was just like that, Wei Wuxian. It wasn't your fault."

"I was never meant to be the heir," he repeats, and Jiang Cheng already feels like he's losing the thread of this conversation. "Your father brought me home and wrote my name next yours. But he didn't – he wanted – he loved you," Wei Wuxian says desperately, "You know that, don't you? Your father loved you so much."

"Yes," he says, and he's felt fear before, but not like this. "Keep going."

He fidgets, but swallows, and keeps going. "He was so much harsher with you than with me. It's not because he loved me more, or less, or anything really. It's just that's what I was there for."

He freezes, his hands buried in his brother's hair. "What are you talking about?"

"That was my role in the house. Why he'd picked me up and brought me there. I was supposed to – motivate you, I guess. It's not like he ever sat me down and was like, this is your role, it was just – obvious, after a certain point, what he wanted from me. If I was worse than you, then you'd have someone to better than, but if I was better, then you'd have someone to beat. I tried not to be better, a few times, but he always knew." Jiang Cheng remembers a couple of those, actually, how he'd burned with humiliation as his father had told Wei Wuxian not to hold back for his sake and Wei Wuxian had just look sad. "If he indulged me and was harsh with you, then you'd try and be better, try and be perfect. He was trying to make you the best you could be, Jiang Cheng."

He wants to deny it, but can't. So many things make sense now. It fits too perfectly to be anything but true. "He *used* you. To manipulate me."

"He was doing what he thought was best for his son," Wei Wuxian says firmly, without a hint of resentment. "He just. It's funny, almost." Jiang Cheng is certain whatever comes out of his brother's mouth next is going to be anything but funny. "I'd guessed a lot of this anyway. But I was, I don't know, thirteen maybe? I overheard an argument between them. Your mother was angry because he'd formally added me to the family, because he'd added me to the line of succession. I wasn't ever meant to be the heir." He swallows. "He thought that me being the son of a servant would be enough to keep me from ever being the heir. But Madame Yu knew better. It's why she was always so loud about hating me, about how I wasn't part of the

family, about me not being your brother. Because she knew that the only way I'd be taken out of the line of succession was if you took me out of it. Uncle Jiang didn't take me out for the same reason he put me in. He didn't think it would matter. He didn't think you'd ever choose the son of a servant, no matter how respected or skilled I was. So really, it was your mother who respected my place in the clan more than your father. It's a little funny, isn't it, since she was always yelling at me, huh?"

Jiang Cheng gives up on the ponytail to lean forward and tug his brother back against his chest, hiding his tears against the back of his brother's head. "Why did you stay? They were using you and playing with you, and by the time you were thirteen everyone knew how good you were. You could have gone to any other clan and they would have taken you in. You didn't need to stay and deal with that."

"Ah, Jiang Cheng," he says, lifting his hands to cover grab onto Jiang Cheng's arms across his chest. "You and A-jie were there. You loved me. I was your brother. How could I give that up?"

"Didn't it – didn't it *hurt*, to stay? To have to deal with that?" he asks.

He shrugs, then says, "It was worth it to me. Being your brother made staying worth it."

"Is it still worth it?" he asks. He understands better, this time, that Wei Wuxian leaving hadn't been about him. That he'd probably always intended to come back once he found a solution to the Wen issue, that he probably would have been able to come back if Jin Guangyao hadn't been working against him at every turn. Wei Wuxian hadn't left because of him. But he hadn't stayed because of him either.

That stings less, now, knowing that his brother had spent their whole childhood staying because of him. Because he loved him and A-jie too much to leave them.

"Always," Wei Wuxian says softly. "You're my brother. Shijie is my sister. That's all that's ever mattered to me. As long as I have you, everything else is worth it."

"Good," he says, finally letting go and picking up his hair again. He's just tied it off into a sleek ponytail when he says, "I love you."

He doesn't know if he's ever said it like that, just that straight forward, all on it's own.

"I love you too," Wei Wuxian says, easily, without even having to think about it.

Jiang Cheng affixes the hair ornament to Wei Wuxian's hair and smiles. "Good," he repeats, then steps back to admire his handiwork. It's still a bit scruffy, because that's just Wei Wuxian, but it looks pretty good. "Now no one will mistake you for anything but what you are."

Wei Wuxian lifts his hand, his fingers dragging against the gold and amethyst lotus hair ornament that Jiang Cheng had take from his own hair, one that makes his status as the heir to the Jiang Clan unmistakable. "Jiang Cheng!"

“Shut up and wear it,” he orders, pulling his own hair back up and using Wei Wuxian’s black ribbon to hold it in place. He’ll replace it with a different ornament when he gets back to his rooms. “If people start treating you respectfully it’ll make my life easier, after all.”

His brother turns around, trying to scowl, but his eyes are bright and the way his lips keep pulling back into a grin really ruins the effect. “Well, if it’s about making your life easier, then that’s fine, I guess.”

“Whatever,” he grumbles as Wei Wuxian stands and slides Baxia against his back.

His brother nudges him in the side. “I’m going to go the market while Lan Zhan is distracted, I want to get him something. Want to come?”

“Yeah, but I ran away from Nie Huaisang and left him with a problem earlier,” he sighs. He’ll tell Wei Wuxian all about Meng Yanmei and his suspicions about Jin Guangyao and the Yin Iron later, but he just doesn’t have the energy for it now, not after the conversation they’ve just had. “I need to go and deal with that.”

“Sounds fun,” he says, twirling Chenqing in his hands so the little bunny charm swings through the air.

He rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Try not to get Lan Wangji something gross. And don’t be late for,” he pauses, realization grabbing him like a vice and cutting off his voice.

“For?” Wei Wuxian prompts after a moment.

“The celebration banquet,” he says, lips feeling numb. “It’s tonight. Don’t forget.”

The banquet that he’d shown up late to last time and then stormed out after getting the location of the Wens and then the next time Jiang Cheng had seen his brother had been at the Burial Mounds.

This will be different. It’ll be fine.

He knows he could go and find the location of the Wens on his own. He could try and get the Nie and Lan to stand with him against it all. He could swoop in and make it so Wei Wuxian doesn’t have to make any choice at all, but that was never the goal of all of this. It’s not about taking Wei Wuxian’s choices away from him. It’s about giving him the tools to make better ones.

No matter what choice he makes, Jiang Cheng will be there. He’ll help him fix it.

“I won’t forget,” Wei Wuxian says, rolling his eyes and unsheathing Baxia so he can ride it into town.

Jiang Cheng stands there watching him until he’s out of sight.

Whatever choice Wei Wuxian makes, Jiang Cheng will stay, will choose him over everything else. It’ll be worth it, whatever the consequences, as long he gets to keep his brother.



Commission of Wei Wuxian done by Natash-shhh on Tumblr

Chapter End Notes

a quick update to make up for how long you guys waited before!

i THINK i can finish the plot stuff next chapter? but i have a quick epilogue i want to squeeze in too ... there might be an extra chapter, we'll see

EDIT: HAHAHAHA no i was super wrong. sorry guys, two more chapters were added

i hope you liked it! feel free to follow/harass me at: [shanastoryteller.tumblr.com](http://shanastoryteller.tumblr.com)

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

yes two chapters were added. i was wrong and i couldn't fit everything in to this last chapter. sorry i'm like this

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Jiang Cheng doesn't know what happened at the market, either this time or the last. What he knows is that the banquet is about to start, he's just walked into the hall, and Wei Wuxian isn't here. A-jie is sitting next to the spot meant for him, but Jiang Cheng doesn't want to sit until his brother arrives. He thinks his sister's presence here is a good thing. A-jie had spent the banquet with Madame Jin last time, both of them excluded from the proceedings because they hadn't participated in the crowd hunt even though obviously Nie Huaisang hadn't either, last time arriving just as it ended, but his attendance hadn't been questioned. Jiang Cheng hopes A-jie invitation to attend the banquet is another sign that Jin Zixuan has figured out that if he wants A-jie as a wife, he's going to have to treat her more like Madame Yu than his own mother.

Nie Mingjue is sitting next to his brother and Jiang Cheng sees the open space between Lan Wangji's seat and Nie Huaisang meant for Wei Wuxian and tries not to let his nerves get to him. Wei Wuxian will show up. He thinks. Nie Huaisang winks at him and he does his best not to scowl back. He'd had offered to let Meng Yanmei stay in his quarters, which Jiang Cheng had wanted to refuse, except that if she was anything like her son, then Nie Huaisang is the only one clever enough that she might not manage to have him spinning in circles.

Lan Wangji is hovering by the entrance, looking out the open door. Jiang Cheng hesitates, standing in front of him instead of walking past him, and Lan Wangji's eyes flicker to meet his. "Where is Wei Ying?"

"He'll be here," he says. "Sit down, it's about to start."

He frowns. "But Wei Ying-"

He touches Lan Wangji's elbow, something he's never done in either timeline, and says, "I'm sure he's fine. Sit next to your brother. It'll be okay." He hopes it'll be okay. He'll *make* it be okay.

Lan Wangji's frown deepens for a moment, but then he nods, settling next to Lan Xichen.

The start of the banquet is almost the same as before. Jin Guangyao congratulates the Nie clan on catching the most prey and Nie Mingjue does something with his face that's almost a smile and doesn't look at Jin Guangyao at all.

Jin Zixun, it seems, is determined to be an asshole. He really wishes he'd just killed the guy during the Sunshot Campaign. His nose is even perfectly healed thanks to a heavy application of spiritual energy, so Jiang Cheng could have at least hit him harder.

"Clan Leader Lan," Jin Zixun says, a fake smile plastered all over his face, "surely you're not going to refuse to drink with me? It would be an insult to the Jin clan."

Jin Guangyao and Nie Mingjue have identical looks of incredulity in their eyes, although Nie Mingjue's face is settled on fury and Jin Guangyao just looks faintly distressed.

"Oh no," A-jie whispers, twisting her hands together. "Should we do something? A-Xian won't like this. What would he do?"

"Drink it for them," he says without thinking, since that's exactly what he'd done for Lan Wangji last time.

A-jie stills, then says thoughtfully, "This is something A-Xian would do."

"Well?" Jin Zixun nudges. "Are you insulting the Jin Clan?"

Lan Xichen's mouth flattens into a hard line and he reaches out to take the cup. Lan Wangji's face becomes even colder, which he hadn't thought was possible.

A-jie stands and he's so surprised that he doesn't think to pull her back down until she's already out of reach. "Don't be so discourteous, Jin Zixun."

There's a startled ripple through everyone as A-jie walks over to them. Shit. He probably should have anticipated this, actually. No matter how much she seemed to have let it go, there's no way she'd been satisfied by Jin Zixun's bow and paltry apology from earlier.

"Lady Jiang," Jin Zixun says through gritted teeth, "surely you can't object? Are the Lan and Jin not friends? He and Lan Wangji must drink with me."

"They must do no such thing," she says calmly, moving herself in front of Lan Xichen not unlike she'd stood in front of Wei Wuxian earlier. "It is inconsiderate to ask your guests to set aside their customs for your comfort."

Clan Leader Yao says, "Ah, Lady Jiang, don't be like-"

She glances over at him and he falls silent.

"Lady Jiang," Lan Xichen says softly, "it's all right. You don't need to do this."

A-jie reaches out, takes the cup out of Jin Zixun's hand and tilts her head back to drink the whole thing in one long swallow. She doesn't even try to hide it behind her sleeve. She then reaches out and takes the other cup from Jin Zixun's hand and drinks the it exactly the same as she had the first, not even a hint of flush on her skin.

Jiang Cheng has to bite his bottom lip to keep from laughing at everyone's reactions. A-jie doesn't drink often, usually only at banquets, but her tolerance falls somewhere between his



and Wei Wuxian's. It'll take a lot more than two cups to phase her.

That said, she's definitely doing this prove a point. This is *not* how A-jie usually behaves nor how she likes to behave, and she certainly could have put a stop to this in her own way instead of their brother's. But he's pretty sure that's not the point of this. A-jie can be quiet, and obedient, and happy like that. For a time. But it's no way to live her life.

Jin Zixuan is smiling, his eyes carefully lowered like that'll hide his expression.

A-jie dislikes Jin Zixun, and likes the Lan, but this is about more than that. It's a test too, to see if she'd have to bow her head and live as Madame Jin lives. Their clan hadn't been in a position for her to make much of a fuss the last time, not if she didn't want their clan to be gutted in the marriage negotiations, but it's different now. Their clan is bigger and stronger and they have more allies. She's testing Jin Zixuan, to see if he still wants her when she doesn't keep her head lowered, when he can't excuse her actions as simply protecting her family.

"Two cups drank for the two Lans," she says. "The pride of the Jin is satisfied."

Lan Xichen seems genuinely shocked while Lan Wangji has a small smile curling around the edge of his mouth.

Jiang Cheng doesn't know what Jin Zixun would have said to that and he doesn't find out.

The doors open and two Jiang disciples enter, wide eyed and grim. Why becomes clear when they step aside.

Wen Qing is here.

She's filthy and nearly swallowed by the worn red clothes hanging off of her. She's never been anything but small thanks to her focus on medical rather than combat cultivation, but she appears even smaller now, a shadow of woman. People are shouting, but she doesn't react, doesn't appear as if she hears them at all. Instead her dark eyes land on him and she crosses the room without looking away. People move toward her but his disciples stay at her side and glare at anyone who gets too close, their hands on their swords.

"Clan Leader Jiang," she says, and she looks even smaller standing in front of him, her head tilted back so she can look him in the eye. She pulls something from her sleeve and says, "Wei Wuxian asked me to give this to you."

He looks down at her hands, hoping for a note, some sort of explanation, but of course that's not what's there.

It's the purple and gold lotus hair ornament that he'd put into his brother's hair earlier today.

She's saying something else, but he can't hear her, the blood in his ears drowning everything out. This is happening again, and somehow even worse than it had last time. Last time Wei Wuxian had tried to be courteous, had left Wen Qing outside while he came in to get information from Jin Zixun, had tried and failed not to cause a scene or cause problems, but of

course Jin Zixun had refused to answer a simple question and escalated it. Now he sends in Wen Qing with this, rejecting the Jiang clan, rejecting his place with his family, and his eyes burn. The beginning of the end is starting all over again, but worse, and his failure is like lead in his stomach. All the things binding Wei Wuxian to them aren't enough, he's still going to go charging towards the Wens while leaving them all behind.

"Jiang Cheng!" He startles, lifting his head to look at her. Her irritation makes her more familiar to him and he tries to hate her for taking away his brother again but all he can think of is her willingly walking onto a funeral pyre because she thought it would keep Wei Wuxian safe. He hadn't been there for the Wen's execution. He likes to think he would have tried to stop it, but he doesn't know, really. "Did you hear anything I just said?"

"Not really," he says, finally taking the ornament from her hands. It's colder and heavier than it was this morning.

"He told me to tell you," she says, emphatically enough that he knows it's not for the first time, "that if you decide not to give it back to him, that he understands, and he's sorry."

"What?" he snaps even as something that tentatively feels like hope slides down his spine. "Where's my brother?"

Her back stays straight but her lips tremble and her throat works like she's swallowing back a sob. "Looking for mine."

"How?" Wei Wuxian had needed to get the information from Jin Zixun before. If he'd known where it was the first time around, he wouldn't have wasted time coming in to talk to them and risk making a scene he hadn't wanted to make.

"He found a friend who offered to help him," she says. Jiang Cheng's eyes flicker around the banquet hall. Mianmian isn't here. That might not mean anything. This is the Jin, she's a commoner, and Jin Zixuan's friendship and trust isn't enough to elevate her in the eyes of Jin Guangshan. But the only person he can think of who might know where to even begin looking and who would be willing to help Wei Wuxian is Mianmian. Who's not here.

The banquet is quiet, which is surprising, except then he sees several people turning red and gesticulating angrily, and when he looks over Lan Wangji inclines his head half an inch. He really is quite good with that silencing spell. He looks back to Wen Qing. "You didn't go with them?" She had last time. Why is this different?

Rage flashes across her face and her hands clench into fists. "They flew. I don't have a sword. Even if I did, my cultivation isn't strong enough to ride it. I didn't want to slow them down by riding with them."

Last time they'd *walked*. It must have taken hours.

"Why are you here?" he asks.

She looks back to the ornament in his hand, swallows, and raises her chin. "I tried to tell him that I should wait in the village, but he said that it was too dangerous. So he gave me that and

a message for you.”

Wei Wuxian isn't rejecting them. He gave his ornament to Wen Qing so that the Jiang disciples would know he wanted her protected. So that Jiang Cheng would know that he wanted her protected. He knows what he's asking, for them to protect a Wen. It's a risk. It could damage their reputation and their standing but Wei Wuxian is asking anyway. That's why he'd said he understood if Jiang Cheng didn't give it back. If he decided that risking their clan like this made him unsuitable as an heir, he wouldn't hold it against him.

He still expects him to do it, though. Wei Wuxian knows that his actions might have terrible consequences, but he sent Wen Qing here anyway. He's trusting that Jiang Cheng will honor his promise to her even if he's angry about it.

Jiang Cheng takes a moment to consider the spine of steel Wen Qing must have to walk into the Jin household, to walk in on the middle of a banquet, on nothing more than Wei Wuxian's word.

He sees movement out of the corner of his eye and takes a step forward, yanking Wen Qing into his chest and lifting Sandu in front of them. The Jin disciple swings down but her sword doesn't make a scratch, enough spiritual energy flowing through Sandu that she actually stumbles back at the force of it. “What the hell do you think you're doing?” he barks, his arm across Wen Qing's back to keep her tucked against him, her face pressed into his chest. He tries not to focus on how he can feel the sharpness of her shoulder blades against his forearm even through all their layers of clothes. However little they'd had to eat at the Burial Mounds, it was clearly more than she's been eating now.

“What are you doing?” the disciple snaps. “She's a Wen! She deserves-” Her mouth seals itself shut.

Jiang Cheng glances at Lan Wangji and considers for the first time that maybe Lan Wangji talked too much as a child. He really can't think of any other reason for him to be so good at this except from repeated exposure, and he can't exactly see him using it all that often on his own clansmen.

“Sect Leader Jiang, Hanguang Jun, this is hardly appropriate behavior,” Jin Guangshan says. Lan Wangji doesn't spell his mouth shut but it's clear he's thinking about it.

Wen Qing is stiff against him, but doesn't protest their position. They're surrounded by Jin after all, so currently there's nowhere safer for her to be. If he puts her at his back, then he's just exposing her to the Jin at his back.

She's trusting him. Or maybe she's just trusting Wei Wuxian, who's trusting him. It doesn't matter. He's going to be worthy of that trust, whoever it's from. He doesn't know what he would have done if he'd been there when she was killed the first time around. But he can choose what he does now.

“Wen Qing is under the protection of the Jiang clan and my personal guest,” he announces. “To raise a hand against her is to raise a hand against me.” Zidian flashes up his arm and Wen

Qing doesn't even flinch at the sparks against her skin. "Do any of you dare raise a hand against me?"

"She's a war criminal!" Jin Zixun snaps. "Have you lost your mind?"

"She's one woman. Do you really think she's a threat to you right now?" Sharp fingers poke into his ribs and it's an effort not to react, to not either smile or recoil from her touch. "We will wait for my brother's return and then he can explain himself. We can discuss what's appropriate once we understand what's going on."

"Jiang Cheng," Jin Guangshan starts again, cajoling and disapproving and for a moment sounding so much like his father that he has to resist the urge to flinch.

"Clan Leader Jin," A-jie says, stepping forward. She must have heard it too if the stiffness of her shoulders is anything to go by. "What does it hurt to wait? The war is over. Surely the Jin can bear to spare some time for us all to figure this out? Wen Qing is no threat to you."

There A-jie goes again, being much better at this than he is. It's going to suck when he has to start speaking for himself because he's just not that good at it. Jin Guangshan can either give in or be forced to imply the might of the Jin clan can be threatened by one starving Wen.

He presses his lips together then says, "Of course, Jiang Yanli. Wei Wuxian may have until the end of the banquet to ... explain himself."

Ridiculous, because of course they have no way to inform Wei Wuxian of this, but Jiang Cheng only says, "Most generous of you, Clan Leader Jin." Wen Qing is here. Wei Wuxian will come back for her if nothing else.

That settles him somewhat and Jin Guangshan almost manages to sound amused when he asks, "Lan Wangji, if you wouldn't mind?"

Jiang Cheng still can't read Lan Wangji's expressions without Wei Wuxian here to play interpreter, but he's pretty sure that Lan Wangji *does* mind. But the Second Jade of Lan just inclines his head and then there's the sound of a couple dozen people taking in startled breaths. How did he manage to cast that many without even moving?

The banquet slowly settles back into an uneasy rhythm. A-jie pointedly takes the seat that had been meant for Wei Wuxian between Lan Wangji and Nie Huaisang and Jiang Cheng slowly lifts his arm from Wen Qing's back and takes a half step away from her. Her face is impassive. "Er, sorry about, uh," he gestures to the space between them, not sure what he's apologizing for exactly but unable to keep himself from doing it.

"I got dirt on your robes," she says.

He looks down and sure enough there are smudges along his front, dust and mud transferred from her onto him. "Uh. It's fine. They've seen worse. Or well, not these ones exactly, they're new, but, you know, other ones. It's fine." She raises an eyebrow and he considers how important it'll be for him to stay sober because he kind of wants to drink until he stops

sounding like an idiot. What's wrong with him? This is unbearable. "Did you want to change? I'm sure A-jie would lend you something."

"If I'm to die, then I might as well do it in rags," she says, no inflection in her voice, as if her possible very near death is nothing more than a curiosity to her.

She had died in rags, once.

"If you're to die today, then you'll die as you lived," he says abruptly. He has no intention of letting her die at all, but it's not like he can say that, in front of everyone, when he's not even supposed to know what all this fuss is about. "A senior disciple and the best medical cultivator of our generation. That's not the sort of person who walks around in rags."

That gets something more than cold detachment from her, although he's not sure what. He just knows that for the first time since she walked in it feels like she's looking at him instead of through him.

Jin Guangshan's face briefly sours when Jiang Cheng excuses himself with a promise to return quickly but he says nothing about it. Probably only because he's hoping they'll do something he can turn on them for, but whatever. He briefly looks to A-jie, but his sister is sitting between the leaders and heirs of both the Lan and Nie sect. She's safer than anyone else in this banquet, probably.

Wen Qing follows him silently to the guest quarters. He doesn't go to the Jiang section, instead heading to the Nie. There's a Nie disciple standing outside of Nie Huaisang's door, which makes sense, but the Jiang cultivator he'd sent along is now in black and silver rather than purple. He raises an eyebrow and waits.

"Sect Leader Jiang," his disciple says, bowing his head. "Young Master Nie thought I would be too conspicuous otherwise."

"You would have been," he agrees ruefully. It would have been instantly suspicious to see a Jiang and Nie standing guard together. "I need to speak to our guest."

The open the door and Jiang Cheng knocks on it before stepping inside, to at least give her a couple second's warning. When they step inside to see Meng Yanmei on her knees in a deep bow, he regrets it. "Get up, fuck, stop that."

"You didn't come to make use of me then?" she murmurs in a low, inviting way that he's sure does it for a lot of people but kind of makes him want to claw his face off.

"Stop that," he repeats wearily. Maybe he should have made Wei Wuxian go get her. They'd probably get along as well as she and Nie Huaisang seem to and then he could have seen Lan Wangji have a massive, internal meltdown. Maybe all three of them will be shameless together and he'll get to see Lan Wangji have a meltdown anyway. "I came to ask you a favor. You can say no." He thinks it'd be audaciously rude of her to say no, but she *could*. Considering she expected him to come and assault her even after he explicitly told her that's not what he was going to do, he feels the need to clarify.

She stands and drops the act, or at least this version of it. Maybe every face of hers is an act. She's Jin Guangyao's mother, after all. "What can I do for you, Sect Leader Jiang?"

He gestures to Wen Qing, who's watching this exchange with a politely neutral face. "We're in the middle of the banquet, so we have to be quick. Can you clean her up and do you have anything she can wear? I'd borrow from my sister's trunk, but it has to be red." If Wei Wuxian was still wearing his old clothes, he could have just found something suitable in there, but now his brother's trunk only contains black and purple.

Meng Yanmei's eyebrows tick upwards then down so quickly that he thinks the gesture must have been genuine. "Of course, Sect Leader Jiang."

He nods and steps back outside to give them privacy, managing to stay still for all of thirty seconds before he starts to pace in front of the door.

"Uh, Sect Leader Jiang?" his disciple starts tentatively. "Is everything okay?"

He snorts, then feels bad because when he's sca— when he's nervous it trickles down to the rest of the sect, which certainly isn't going to help anything. "Everything's fine."

The politely disbelieving expression reminds him of A-jie. Probably because that's where his disciples usually pick it up from. "Of course, Sect Leader Jiang."

The Nie disciples looks faintly scandalized but the almost sarcastic words tug a smile from his lips. His disciples know better than to pull that kind of shit around outsiders, which means that the Nie aren't considered outside enough for his people to pretend at being perfectly obedient around them. He thinks that's a good sign.

The door opens and Wen Qing steps out. He runs a quick eye over her, trying to be impersonal about it. He lost the right to find her beautiful almost twenty years ago. But it's hard not to think it anyway. She's clean, her hair pulled back into a bun and kept in place with an elaborate lacquered red hair stick. Meng Yanmei has a body that has allowed her to excel in her profession, and even if she weren't malnourished, Wen Qing would have extra room in the robe around several places. As it is, the clothes have been wrapped closer and tighter, the extra material meaning that it's pulled modestly across her front and doesn't fall too close to her hips. The eye catching silk robe is few shades brighter than true Wen red but gets the point across just the same.

"Better," he says shortly. "If you want the people up there to take you seriously, this is better." He wants to offer her his arm, but he doesn't want her to reject it, so instead he just starts walking and trusts that she'll follow him.

She does, moving easily in the borrowed clothing. "Nothing has changed for me since we last spoke."

Her statement confuses him until he remembers that the last time she saw him, he'd offered her protection, but only for her, and not for her clan. Fuck, he was such an arrogant brat. "Of course it hasn't," he says curtly. "You've been protecting your division of the Wen Sect for years. You can no more abandon them now than I could abandon the Jiang." He almost leaves

it at that, he would normally because he's shit at this, but once she had burned and he hadn't known about it until all that was left of her was ashes. "I should have understood that before and I didn't. I do now."

They're silent the rest of the way and they're about to step back into the banquet hall when she touches his arm and he freezes. "Why are you doing this?"

"My brother asked me to," he says.

"And that's all?" she presses.

He's not allowed to find her beautiful. It's probably really messed up that her sharp, distrustful eyes simultaneously remind him of his mother and cause a swell of fondness in his chest. "I wasn't willing to stand against the rest of cultivation world for you before. I'm not now. But I'll do it for my brother."

She'd chosen correctly the last time. Wei Wuxian had turned his back on everything and everyone to protect her and her people. Even if Jiang Cheng had wanted to, he couldn't. It wasn't ever about the Wens being worth saving. It was about everything else being worth abandoning.

Considering he's just told her that he's willing to let her and her people rot, he's not expecting the quirk of her lips that's almost a smile and he's certainly not expecting her small hand on the crook of his elbow. "If Wei Wuxian can't find my people, I'm going to die with my hands around Jin Guangshan's throat."

He's laughing when they step back into the banquet hall, attracting far too much attention, but he can't bring himself to mind.

The banquet goes on and Jiang Cheng tries not to worry as the hours pass, as Wen Qing steadily grows tenser at his side. She's not the only one. Lan Wangji could actually be carved from jade and he doesn't think any of them would know the difference. He only moves to brush his fingers against the red lotus charm hanging from his sword. The rest of Lan and Nie aren't much better, Nie Huaisang's fiddling with his fan becoming so obnoxious that his brother takes it out of his hands to whack him over the head with it. It pulls a smile out of everyone for a moment but it doesn't last.

The sky opens and he can hear rain pouring outside. It's late, not quite midnight and the banquet just starting to slow, when the front doors bang open.

Jiang disciples step through first and then there's Wei Wuxian.

He's soaked, his hair's a mess, and the last time he'd seen his brother so coldly furious both of Jiang Cheng's siblings had died.

He has a toddler on his hip, the child's hands fisted in the front of his brother's robes and his big dark eyes peaking out at all of them. It should temper the image of Wei Wuxian's fury, but instead it only enhances it.

More Wens shuffle through, even more ragged and filthy than Wen Qing had been, and then there are more Jiang. They're standing around them, hands on their swords, and their faces almost as cold as his brother's.

Mianmian is the last to step through, her golden robes streaked with mud and dripping, but her shoulders are back and her eyes are clear even if they're angry. This is how she'd looked when she'd stormed out of the meeting and left her sect over Wei Wuxian. This is what Mianmian looks like when she's decided to do the right thing, consequences be damned.

"A-Ning!" Wen Qing tears away from him, and sure enough Wen Ning steps out from behind Wei Wuxian, his arms wide to catch his sister as she barrels into him. He's so used to Wen Ning seeming small, slouched and timid, that it's actually a bit of a surprise to see how much bigger he is compared to his sister.

Jin Guangshan scowls. "Wei Wuxian! What's the meaning of this?"

"Funny," he says coldly, "that's what I was going to ask you. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Me?" Jin Guangshan scoffs. "Why have you dragged these worthless Wen dogs into my hall?"

Wei Wuxian says nothing, instead turning to look around the banquet hall. "Do you condone this? Sect Leader Jin told you that the remaining Wens would be confined to a valley to ensure they didn't cause an uprising. He lied to you."

He gestures behind himself with the arm that isn't holding the child, who Jiang Cheng thinks might be Wen Yuan. The huddled people are old and frail, no threat at all, and it's clear they've been abused.

Nie Mingjue half gets to his feet before being tugged down by Nie Huaisang. He hides the lower half of his face beneath the fan, likely to disguise what he's saying to his brother. Whatever it is seems to work before his hands clench into fists on his thighs but he doesn't move to stand up again. Lan Wangji has three fingers on his brother's wrist, which is apparently all Lan Xichen needs to keep from standing. Lan Wangji's eyes are intent on Wei Wuxian, probably waiting for some signal that he wants them to jump in.

Jiang Cheng hopes it's sooner rather than later. He knows his brother is trying to make a point, but this won't work if they don't have the support of the Nie and the Lan, which means Wei Wuxian is going to have to actually let them support them.

There's heavy moment of silence, then Wei Wuxian turns back to Jin Guangshan. "You swore in a meeting with the other clan leaders that the Wen you gathered would be confined to a valley while things settled. Instead you've been capturing them and forcing them into labor camps. These are but a handful of the Wen you've been mistreating. I've been told there are dozens more camps in existence."

Nie Mingjue's cup shatters and Lan Xichen's face is so perfectly blank that for once he and his brother are wearing matching expressions. Keeping a few Wen around to make an



example of is bad enough, is something they hadn't felt comfortable ignoring in either timeline even though last time they'd been backed into a corner. Finding out several dozen of them had been confined and beaten was worse, but this is different. This isn't something they can ignore, even if they'd wanted to. This is a sect leader lying and manipulating and abusing people right under their noses and in violation of his promise to them.

Did Jin Guangshan promise the same thing last time in that meeting? Jiang Cheng wasn't there for it last time, but he thinks he must have, that Lan Xichen would not have settled for anything less. It almost makes him wonder if this would have happened last time, Wei Wuxian boldly exposing Jin Guangshan's depravity whether he had Jiang Cheng's support or not. Last time, Wei Wuxian hadn't known about Jin Guangshan's promise, because Jiang Cheng hadn't been at that meeting, and so wasn't able to tell him. Which means when he'd heard about the camps he'd had no reason to suspect that it was happening in secret. That it was something the others would disapprove of. Even when he'd confronted Jin Zixun and gotten the truth out of him last time, everything had been framed in such a way that it sounded like Jin Zixun's actions had been an isolated incident rather than standard practice, so the rest of them hadn't suspected and Wei Wuxian had thought they knew.

Fuck. No wonder he'd ran away with them. He'd known that the Jiang were in a precarious position and thought that the Lan and Nie knew what was going and didn't *care*. What else was he going to do? What else could he do, with their clan not in a strong enough position to stand up to the Jin on their own and when he thought that the other two were at best indifferent to the Wen's suffering, if not outright complicit in it?

"Not all of them could be confined together, that's asking for disaster," Jin Guangshan says carelessly. "We've been keeping some of them close, as of course you were aware. You saw a few of them at the archery competition. As you said. What does it matter to you? They were our enemies in the war. Do you condone the actions of the Wen?"

"Not all of the same clan are of the same mind," Wei Wuxian says.

Mianmian steps forward, coming to stand besides him, her dirty golden robes and defiant eyes silently proving his point. Jin Zixuan's face twists in a way that Jiang Cheng thinks might be pride before it smooths out. Jin Guangyao is inching his way his half-brother's side and he tries to keep half an eye on them while not looking like he's staring, since he doesn't want to draw anyone else's attention to Jin Guangyao. He steps just behind Jin Zixuan and then starts speaking softly, his lips barely moving. Jiang Cheng wouldn't have noticed at all if he wasn't looking for it.

"Forget the Wen," Nie Mingjue snarls. "This is about you, Jin Guangshan, and what you promised us. You've broken your word as a sect leader. How can we trust you?"

They never trusted him, really, but it's all about the scale of the betrayal. Or, well, the scale of it and publicness of it. This is good, he thinks. If it's about human decency and the value of human life, there's no chance that everyone will agree. If it's about the stabilization of sect politics, they just might.

"Now, Clan Leader Nie, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Jin Guangshan says, but his jovial mask is starting to slip. "You're being irrational-"

“No,” he says. It’s just one word but it lands like a blade on an execution block. He stands and this time Nie Huaisang doesn’t pull him back down. “This is the last straw, Jin Guangshan. I cannot abide evil. If I continue to turn my face away from your actions, that’s what I’ll become.”

Lan Xichen is staring at Nie Mingjue, his face soft in surprise before he hides it behind a smile. Surprisingly, he looks to him next, a question in the slope of his brow. Jiang Cheng scoffs, audible enough that several people turn to him, because really, as if it’s not obvious. A-jie starts to stand and Nie Huaisang and Lan Wangji reach out at once to gently push her back down.

He crosses the room to stand next to his brother, who’s watching him warily. Jiang Cheng takes the gold lotus hairpiece out of his robes. If his brother’s hair wasn’t such a wild, sopping, mess he’d put it back in for him here, in front of everyone. As is, he holds it out towards him and says, “Here. Idiot.”

The smile Wei Wuxian gives him, warm and relieved, makes him want to chuck it at his brother’s head so he stops looking at him like that. “You’re sure?”

“Shut up,” he orders, then bends down enough to look Wen Yuan in the eye and holds the hairpiece out to him instead. “Can you hold onto this for Wei Wuxian? It seems he has his hands full.”

Wen Yuan nods and takes it with clumsy fingers, tucking it against his chest so it’s smushed between him and Wei Wuxian. That’s probably not very comfortable, but that’s what his brother gets for not taking it when he should have.

“Sect Leader Jiang,” Jin Guangshan says, not even bothering to hide the thread of unease in his voice. “Surely you can’t condone this?”

He raises an eyebrow. “My brother speaks with my mouth. His words are my words.”

Lan Xichen almost turns his head toward Jin Guangyao before stopping himself and Jiang Cheng can’t help but think that this is one more thing that’s different. If Lan Xichen is surprised now, there’s no way he’d have thought that he could have depended on the Nie’s support last time, when he and Nie Mingjue were at odds. And last time he and Lan Xichen hadn’t been close, hadn’t been anything really, so he couldn’t depend on the Jiang. Jin Guangyao had wanted to do something about the Wens and Lan Xichen had wanted to help him but had known that the newly rebuilt Lan couldn’t stand against the Jin alone and so he’d done nothing. Like the Nie had done nothing, like Jiang Cheng had done nothing, like all the minor clans had done nothing. All of them knowing they couldn’t stand against him alone but not believing they could stand together.

He hopes they believe that now. The minor sects, even Sect Leader Yao, are staying silent. They know better than to get into a dispute between the four major clans, know better than to pick a side before the dust settles.

Lan Wangji removes his fingers from his brother’s wrist and Lan Xichen rises, still smiling even as his eyes turn hard. “You’ve gone too far, Jin Guangshan.”

“What do you want?” he demands, scowling like they’re all unruly children even though there’s genuine fear in his eyes now. “This is outrageous!”

Nie Mingjue doesn’t so much as blink. “All of the Wen will be released into our custody. They are no longer your concern.”

“Fine, if you want the mess so badly,” he says, his shoulders relaxing.

“You misunderstand,” Nie Mingjue says. “I’m not asking you. I’m telling you. You’ve proven yourself untrustworthy and have debased both yourself and your position. After we’ve gathered the people in these disgusting camps of yours, we’ll decide what’s to be done about you.”

“You have no authority over me, boy!” Jin Guangshan says, still trying to sound like this is all some game but not doing a very good job of it. “None of you have any say over what happens within the Jin sect. You forget your place.”

Lan Xichen raises an eyebrow. “You forget yours. We do not control what happens in your sect, but we control what happens within our own. While you are clan leader, no trade will occur between the Jin and Lan sects. Your disciples are not welcome in our lands. Your requests for aid will return unanswered. No invitations for cultivation conferences or meetings will find their way to you from the Lan.”

“Nor from the Jiang,” Jiang Cheng says.

“Nor from the Nie,” Nie Mingjue finishes.

“Presumptuous little brats,” Jin Guangshan snarls. “Seize them! They’ve just threatened your sect leader!”

Most of the Jin in the hall move to obey, although he notices that Jin Zixuan doesn’t, instead standing with his half brother and watching. Jin Zixun goes red faced and furious, but once he sees that Jin Zixuan isn’t moving, he doesn’t either. Lan Wangji has placed himself in front of both A-jie and Nie Huaisang, and Jiang Cheng thinks he might even end up *liking* Lan Wangji at the end of all this.

Jiang Cheng reaches for his sword and steps in front of Wen Qing and Wen Ning without really thinking about it. Out of the corner of his eye sees Wei Wuxian raise his hand to grab Baxia, but Mianmian’s clear voice cuts between them, “Did you think I was alone in my feelings?”

He doesn’t know what she’s talking about until the Wen shuffle forward and he sees a stream of golden clad young women rush into the hall, swords drawn.

One of the golden clad women doesn’t have a sword. One of them isn’t a Jin at all.

He supposes it really was asking too much to expect the woman who bore and raised Jin Guangyao to quietly sit in her room and not cause trouble. Had Mianmian found out about her somehow and invited her along or had Meng Yanmei gone exploring, found something

that looked like trouble, and decided to get involved? Knowing what he does of Jin Guangyao, it was probably the latter.

The women make such quick work of the other Jin it's a little embarrassing, kicking their swords away and forcing them to their knees. Jin Guangshan is such a sexist bastard that for a woman to be admitted to his clan as a cultivator they need to be at least twice as good as he'd require a man to be, and it looks like that's coming back to bite him.

"You've just attacked three clan leaders," Jiang Cheng says. "Are you looking to start a war, Jin Guangshan?"

Jin Guangyao's eyes go wide and he pales to an unsettling shade. For a moment Jiang Cheng thinks he's reacting to the prospect of another war, but then he notices that his gaze isn't on them. Jiang Cheng follows it and finds himself looking at Meng Yanmei.

"I," Jin Guangshan starts, then pauses, a strange look crossing his face. "What's she doing here?"

Meng Yanmei crosses the room and none of the stop her. She pauses in front of Jin Guangshan and goes into a deep bow, standing close to him in a way only a prostitute would dare. "A-Shan."

He just looks bewildered. "Why are you here? *How* are you here? I'm a little busy, Yanmei, I don't have time for you right now."

Jiang Cheng sees a flash of a blade then hears a sharp, shocked gasp.

Meng Yanmei takes two steps away and reveals Jin Guangshan looking down in disbelief at the blood pouring from his chest. Perhaps not *all* of Jin Guangyao's murderous tendencies could be blamed on the Yin Iron.

She wipes her dagger off on the front of her borrowed robes. "You should have been nicer to our son, A-Shan."

There's a rush of noise as the Jin disciples surge forward as one, two of the female cultivators grabbing Meng Yanmei and others running for Jin Guangshan, trying to staunch the bleeding as they pour spiritual energy into him. Wei Wuxian has tucked Wen Yuan's face into his neck. Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen share a quick, panicked glance, because of course this has all gone to shit.

Jin Zixuan and Jin Guangyao are standing together in same spot, watching their father die with identical expressions on their faces. Jiang Cheng doesn't know what to make of that.

Wen Qing rushes forward and Jiang Cheng holds out his arm to stop her, catching her around the waist. "What are you doing?"

She slaps at his arm, but he doesn't let her go, not yet. "I can help him! Release me!"

He can only stare. "Why would you want to?"

“I don’t!” she snaps, but she’s still struggling to get away from him, still struggling to get to Jin Guangshan.

Wen Ning steps forward and Jiang Cheng lets go of her so her brother can grasp her shoulders and push her back, “Jiejie, stop-”

“It’s okay,” Jin Zixuan says. Everyone falls quiet, until the only sound is Jin Guangshan’s dying breaths. “After what he did to you, he doesn’t deserve your help.”

Wen Qing slumps into Wen Ning’s hands, but her eyes stay locked with Jin Zixuan’s for the long moments it takes for Jin Guangshan’s breath to stutter, quicken, then stop.

Jin Guangshan is dead.

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It’s so late that it’s early and Jiang Cheng is exhausted. Things have happened quickly and there’s so much left to be done. Madame Jin currently in her room sobbing over her husband’s corpse. Jiang Cheng has no idea how much of it is genuine and he sort of suspects that she’s doing it more because it’s what’s expected of her than anything else. Meng Yanmei is being confined to a cell with a guard from each sect to keep anyone from trying anything, including Meng Yanmei. Jin Guangyao had eagerly disclosed the locations of the rest of the camps and teams made up of cultivators from every clan had been sent to dismantle them and bring the occupants back to Jin Tower. It’s the middle of the night and still raining but no one had dared suggest they wait until morning. Wei Wuxian had settled the Wen in the Jiang guest quarters where Li Jun has been put in charge of their care.

All of that and still nothing is handled, really. With all the immediate crises taken care of, there’s the matter of how they’re supposed to go forward from this. They’re currently all in one of the private rooms, looking at each other in silence. It’s a hastily constructed council of the major clans, and it says something that none of the minor clans had protested their exclusion.

Jiang Cheng has Wei Wuxian and A-jie with him, now that his brother is finally free of his child attachment. Wen Yuan had screamed something terrible every time Wei Wuxian tried to put him down, so he’d decided it would be easier to keep carrying him. Except it’d been hours of his brother helping him organize their people and sending out groups and making decisions, and he’d done the whole thing with a child on his hip until Wen Yuan had finally fallen asleep and could be given back to his grandmother.

Nie Mingjue has Nie Huaisang and Nie Zonghui, and Lan Xichen has Lan Wangji and Lan Biyu. Jin Zixuan has brought Jin Guangyao and Jin Zixun. He’d asked Mianmian, but she’d gently pointed out that considering she’d been front and center in all of this, that probably wouldn’t look very good right now. He’s pretty sure Jin Zixuan had only agreed because he needed someone out there handling everyone that he trusted. Jiang Cheng hates how that makes him like Jin Zixuan a little bit, that, after everything, Mianmian is still one of the few people he trusts.

“I hate to do this,” he says, finally breaking the silence. He doesn’t say anything about how they all flinch at the sound. “But I feel as if it might be best to get everything all in the open right at the beginning, regardless of the consequences.”

This can probably wait. But he doesn’t want to have another one of these meetings if it all goes to shit, so they’re just going to deal with all the bullshit now so that Jiang Cheng doesn’t have to worry about it later. It’s not as if things could get any worse, after all.

Well, they could, obviously, he’s just hoping that they won’t.

Lan Xichen looks like he regrets not having that drink earlier. “Sect Leader Jiang?”

“Sorry,” he says to all of them, then turns to his brother. “Would you be able to tell if someone was being influenced by Yin Iron?”

He blinks. “Uh. Yes? But I’m the,” he cuts himself off, then looks at everyone, and sighs. He glances at Jiang Cheng, who nods. It’s not like everyone doesn’t already know anyway. As if the Stygian Tiger Amulet could have been made of anything else. “I’m the only one with a piece left. And I’m not corrupting anyone with it.”

No one even pretends to be surprised.

“Unless you’re not,” he says. Jin Guangyao isn’t reacting at all and Jiang Cheng can’t tell if it’s a mask or if he genuinely doesn’t know. He’s leaning towards the latter. He probably doesn’t think he’s being influenced by it at all. If he did, he’d probably have gotten rid of it on his own. He’d thought Jin Guangyao had been a bit control freak *before* everything had come to light. “I just – something about the timeline of things, with Xue Yang, seems off. Wei Wuxian, please.”

His brother looks bewildered but obediently lifts Chenqing to his lips. Everyone seems as if they’re too tired to protest. The Stygian Tiger Amulet slides out of the sleeve of his robe, thin tendrils of black smoke trailing out of it as it makes a lazy circle around the room, gently bopping around as if it’s not the most powerful and deadly spiritual artifact in written record. It passes by everyone easily.

Until it gets close to Jin Guangyao.

He gasps and topples forward, clutching at his chest. It’s so reminiscent of how they’d just seen Jin Guangshan die that even Jiang Cheng can’t help recoiling. All three of the Nie reach for him at once, as does Lan Xichen. Jin Zixuan is there first, of course, since he’s sitting right next to him, but as soon as his hands touch his brother’s shoulders he yelps and pulls them back as if he’s been shocked.

Jin Guangyao convulses in time with the sharp notes of Wei Wuxian’s flute and his mouth drops open. Out leaks resentful energy as thick black smoke that twirls itself around the Stygian Tiger Amulet. Jiang Cheng is prepared for someone to start yelling at Wei Wuxian, prepared for them to assume the worst of Wei Wuxian and blame him for this somehow. But no one does. Even Jin Zixun keeps his peace, although Jiang Cheng suspects that’s because he’s hoping Wei Wuxian does kill Jin Guangyao.

Eventually the smoke tapers off and Jin Guangyao stops seizing. The Stygian Tiger Amulet disappears back into Wei Wuxian's robes as the last notes fade and if he looks a little worse for wear after such a small use of demonic cultivation, well, it's been a long night for everyone.

"A-Yao?" Lan Xichen only hesitates a moment before placing a hand on his back. He doesn't get shocked and Jin Guangyao shudders and then opens his eyes, clumsily pushing himself upright. "A-Yao, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he says, but it seems more reflexive than genuine. His face is creased in confusion and then he turns and looks straight at Nie Mingjue, who's not exactly hovering over him but is pretty close. His face pales and then he's pushing himself upright only to fall on his knees. For a moment Jiang Cheng thinks he's collapsed but then he sees he's bowing, prostrating himself in front of Nie Mingjue. "A-Ming, brother, I'm – I didn't mean – I meant to give it to you," he says desperately, and Jiang Cheng has only heard Jin Guangyao sound like this once before, when he was talking to Lan Xichen at the end of everything. "I was going to get it from Xen Yang and give it to you, but as soon as I touched it, I – I didn't want to kill him!" He pauses and his shoulder hunch a little higher around his ears. "Well. I *wanted* to. But I wouldn't have."

Lan Xichen moves as if to comfort him, but Jin Zixuan holds him back with a touch to his arm.

Nie Mingjue swallows. "Why didn't you come to me and tell me first? I could have sent someone with you." By the way he says that, Jiang Cheng gets the impression that by someone he means himself.

"I wanted to impress you," he says, sounding so ashamed that Jiang Cheng can't imagine for a moment that this is fake. He's known this whole time that Jin Guangyao is still only a teenager, if only barely, but looking at him now he believes it. "I thought if I did maybe you'd – I would have made a good Nie."

Now it's Nie Mingjue's turn to look confused. "You were one."

Jin Guangyao is quiet for a moment, then he says, "You didn't have me change my name."

Jiang Cheng had never thought about that before. It had barely seemed strange to him, after all, since no one in his sect changes their names. But Meng Yao had been the only Nie without the clan name.

"I didn't – I was trying to – I didn't want you to be ashamed," he settles on finally. "I didn't want you or anyone else to think that there was anything wrong with the name Meng or how you got it. I wanted you to be proud of it. For it to be a name people respected. You were my general and you were Meng Yao. But you were still Nie. Of course you were."

Jin Guangyao finally lifts his head, looking like he's about to cry, and Nie Mingjue isn't doing much better.

He leans over, cupping Jin Guangyao's face in one large hand so he can turn his face first one way, then the other. "Ah," he says. "There you are. I've missed you."

Jiang Cheng isn't sure which one of them moves first, but then they're clutching each other, Jin Guangyao pressing his face into Nie Mingjue's chest. Jin Zixun rolls his eyes so hard he's surprised they don't come out of his head while A-jie and Wei Wuxian are clutching each other's hands and crying. "Really?" he hisses.

"It's just so sweet!" A-jie whispers back, sniffing. The way her and his brother's lips twitch mean they're definitely doing this to mess with him, at least a little bit, and suddenly it's much harder to keep his glare in place.

Lan Xichen clears his throat, gripping his hands too tightly behind his back. "Does this mean the person you were ever since leaving the Nie is not truly you?"

"No, Lan Xichen, of course not!" Jin Guangyao denies, pulling away to look at him earnestly. But then he frowns and turns to Wei Wuxian, head tilted to the side.

Wei Wuxian waves a dismissive hand. "No, yeah, of course. Mostly. It doesn't change who you are, exactly, especially after such a short exposure. Eventually, maybe, you'd end up a different person, but this just made you, well, extra violent and short sighted, at times, and it clouded your own perception of those actions. I'm actually pretty impressed you just didn't go on murder rampage after touching it. The Yin Iron I used had already been forged once so it was a lot easier to handle. Uh," he rubs his nose, "you should probably let me handle the Yin Iron though. You shouldn't touch it again."

Jin Guangyao shudders and nods. "Yes."

"Not that this hasn't all been riveting," Jin Zixun says crossly, "but can we get on with what we actually came here to discuss?"

Nie Huaisang snorts, but only squeezes Jin Guangyao's arms before dragging Nie Zonghui and his brother back to their seats. Lan Xichen gently touches the corner of Jin Guangyao's mouth in a way that makes Jiang Cheng want to throw himself out of the window before taking his own seat once more.

"Wait," Wei Wuxian says, and they all tense. "We're all friends here or whatever, right? We don't need to stand on ceremony or propriety or anything?"

"Seems a bit pointless now," Lan Biyu grumbles, the least Lan like display Jiang Cheng has ever seen from her. But he supposes she just had to watch her clan leader act scandalously right in front of her. Surely there's a sect rule against being disgusting in public.

"Okay, because I've had a *day*, and I think I deserve this." Wei Wuxian pushes himself out his seat and then drops himself down onto Lan Wangji's lap.

Lan Wangji turns bright red and mutters a faintly distressed, "Wei Ying," that doesn't seem like much of protest with the way his arms settle around Wei Wuxian's waist.



A-jie bits her bottom lip to keep from laughing and Lan Xichen's smile is indulgent. Lan Biyu just sighs.

Jiang Cheng meets Nie Huaisang's eyes over his fan because he's the only one here he can trust to not be gross right now.

"Anyway," he says loudly, "so we're all agreed that Jin Zixuan will be the next Jin clan leader and none of us are going to be assholes about it? Great, next, what are we doing with all the Wens?"

The look Jin Zixuan shoots him is grateful rather than irritated.

It just makes Jiang Cheng want to punch him in the face on principle.

## Chapter End Notes

nmj: meng yao wants to earn his place, not marry into it, and i am NOT disappointed by that! i will respect it!!

my: why wont my beloved himbo PUT A RING ON IT

whooh! was that as much of a rollercoaster for you as it was for me? good times.

i hope you liked it!

feel free to follow/harass me at: [shanastoryteller.tumblr.com](https://shanastoryteller.tumblr.com)

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Jiang Cheng had agreed to meet Jin Zixuan early the next morning he hadn't fully considered the consequences of that decision. He feels like he could sleep for another week.

When he steps out of his rooms after too few hours of sleep and finds Wei Wuxian waiting for him, his lotus hairpiece back where it belongs on top of his head, he considers not saying anything about the dark circles under his eyes or the fact that Wei Wuxian is waiting for him outside of his door at such an early hour. Jin Zixuan had requested they meet him, but Jiang Cheng had been fully resigned to having to bodily drag his brother out of bed. But Wei Wuxian is holding himself a little too carefully, so instead he narrows his eyes at the several mouth shaped bruises on Wei Wuxian's neck. "You," he says, with as much outrage as he can muster this early in the morning, "are not married."

"Jiang Cheng, really, spring is so far away," he teases, some of the tension leaking out of him. If everything weren't such a mess, Jiang Cheng would throw a fit in front of everyone about Lan Wangji corrupting Wei Wuxian's virtue just to see Lan Xichen's face. "Relax, we didn't do anything worth that scowl. Lan Zhan is so proper!"

Jiang Cheng is pretty sure Wei Wuxian is actually the more proper one between them, at least about stuff like that. Or he was in the other timeline, at least, where he only acted so shamelessly because Lan Wangji seemed to like it, for some reason.

There's actually nothing about this conversation that he wants to continue discussing, so he asks, "How's Li Jun?"

"Furious," he says cheerfully, following behind Jiang Cheng as he stalks towards the kitchens. They're up before any sort of reasonable person would be, because Jin Zixuan is a masochist or secretly a Lan or something, but that doesn't mean they have to be both sleep deprived and hungry.

He raises an eyebrow, because he's honestly not even sure what a furious Li Jun would look like. He tends to leave the fury to Wang Yan.

Wei Wuxian laughs and amends, "Mildly perturbed and wondering if perhaps he's done something to upset you. I told him that actually we kept putting him in charge of people because we trust him so much, and he respectfully requests that we trust him a little less."

He laughs because there's no one but his brother around to see him do it. "Poor bastard. Absolutely not. We're going to need to talk to the Wens--"

"Already did," he says. "Or well, Wen Qing and I did. None of them want to stay with the Jin, which certainly can't be surprising. Neither do they want to go to the Lan, which well, that can't be that surprising either, for different reasons. Some sound like they want to go off

on their own and leave the cultivation world behind, but most don't. A lot of them want to join the Nie, and Nie Mingjue would be a fool to refuse them. He's been struggling to handle the Wen land properly and the very same people who worked with and on that land want to go back to doing it for him."

He hums. Nie Mingjue can use the people, and if Jiang Cheng had grown up under the Wen, where it was encouraged to be loud and brazen and demanding, he wouldn't want to and live amongst the Lan either. The Nie clan is the closest to Wen in location and clan temperament. "What about us?"

"Some want to come with us," Wei Wuxian says. "Those who neither want to leave the cultivation world nor want to return to a place they hadn't exactly prospered in. Wen Qing and her people asked to return with us to Lotus Pier."

His heart ticks up to a truly concerning tempo, but he refuses to show it. He'll get over it. He's had a lot of practice at getting over things. Or, well, at pretending to get over things at least. "I'm sure that kid will be thrilled."

"He was just clingy because we got them out," Wei Wuxian says dismissively, but there's a hint of wistfulness there that he doesn't quite manage to hide. Jiang Cheng doesn't point out that Mianmian had been there too and he hadn't been clinging to her. If they're coming to Lotus Pier, there's no need for him to push.

There is something he should probably push on, though. He doesn't look at his brother as he says, "You didn't sleep last night."

He leaves it open so that Wei Wuxian can deflect and make another joke about Lan Wangji and too long engagements if that's what he wants to do. But instead he just sighs and bumps their shoulders together. "Just nightmares."

Nightmares haven't been as much of a problem recently, he doesn't think. But if anything were going to dredge them back up again, he supposes yesterday would have done it. For multiple reasons. He hums, willing to wait, or let it go. This is something else he learned as a sect leader and absolutely not something he knew how to do when it would benefit him most. Sometimes Wei Wuxian is willing to say more when Jiang Cheng doesn't try and force it out of him, and he can be patient sometimes, as long as his brother stays in arm's length. It's when people try and leave him that he holds them too tightly.

"It was you," he says, and Jiang Cheng feels cold before he continues, "in the camps. I couldn't find you, I just kept going to new ones and not finding you and Shijie kept asking me where you were and I couldn't – you weren't anywhere, no matter where I looked. My nightmare was Wen Qing's reality, and I just," he clears his throat and forces a smile. "Little brothers aren't supposed to go missing."

That sounds like it has a lot to do with Wei Wuxian thinking about him going back to Lotus Pier and losing his golden core and then Wei Wuxian deciding to give up his golden core, which isn't something he's supposed to know anything about, so he elbows him in the side and says, "Well, I'm right here," and doesn't say that elder siblings aren't supposed to go missing either.

He also doesn't ask how long, exactly, Wei Wuxian had been waiting outside his door because he's sure he's not going to like the answer.

They're about to enter the kitchen to steal something approaching breakfast when they're intercepted but a Jin servant and brought to another meeting room instead. The servant only frowns at them when Wei Wuxian whines about being hungry. Jiang Cheng can't imagine being hungry is going to help anyone's tempers, certainly not his own, and he's pleasantly surprised when there's food waiting and set out for everyone.

"Shijie," Wei Wuxian murmurs and Jiang Cheng pulls a face. She's already sitting at the table, hands folded in her lap and he points to the food and raises an eyebrow. She flushes and looks down. She seems nervous, because there's really only one good reason Jin Zixuan would have to ask to see only them this early in the morning, so he just smiles at her. He makes a note to tease her about all this later and to make sure she at least takes a nap or something. It had been depressingly late when they'd all retired the night before and A-jie must have gotten up hours earlier than them to cook all this.

The door opens again and Jin Zixuan enter. Alone. He sees the surprise he feels on Wei Wuxian's face. "No Madame Jin?"

Jin Zixuan tries to sneer but it comes out more as a grimace. "Mother declined to attend."

"Pissed that you're not killing Meng Yanmei?" Wei Wuxian guesses.

Jiang Cheng isn't surprised. Not only are they not killing her, they're not even really imprisoning her. Instead she's being released into the custody of Nie Mingjue, which pretty much means that she's going free. Nie Huaisang is delighted, at least.

Jin Zixuan shrugs. Was Jiang Cheng this hopeless when he first became clan leader? Worse, probably, but Jin Zixuan is in a better position than he was. They're not in the middle of war and he's on friendly terms with the rest of the sect leaders, which Jiang Cheng certainly hadn't been when he'd taken up the position. He'll be fine.

He takes a seat opposite to them, his face softening as he looks over the food and his eyes flicker to A-jie. Jiang Cheng is a little bit remorseful that Jin Zixuan isn't proposing to A-jie like he had last time, muddy and with a half finished lotus pond, because it had been one of the only things that had made him likable the first time around. But he supposes, considering everything, Jin Zixuan hasn't exactly had time to make a lotus pond and wanting to do this formally and properly when everything else has been such a mess isn't the worst idea. He's been nicer to A-jie this time around, for some reason. Or, well, more honest with her, since he'd liked her last time too, he'd just been even worse than Lan Wangji at expressing his emotions for a while there.

"Sect Leader Jiang," he starts, except something is wrong, He doesn't look nervous. He looks sad. He shouldn't be sad when he's asking to marry A-jie. "Young Master Wei. Lady Jiang. I think we all know why I asked Mianmian to invite Lady Jiang here and what I was hoping would be arranged during this visit."

Jiang Cheng inclines his head.

He presses his lips together, looking at the space over their heads rather than at them. “I understand that no such arrangement will occur-”

“Why the fuck not?” Jiang Cheng interrupts, only aware that he’s shouting when he hears the echo of his own voice. A-jie looks devastated and Wei Wuxian is pissed, and that should matter, and it does, but all he can think of is the first time he held Jin Ling. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Jin Zixuan’s mouth drops open before he scowls and snaps, “Why would you agree? Our clan head was just murdered by my brother’s mother, we’ve been revealed as oathbreakers and torturers and slave owners, and the entire clan is a mess that I don’t even know how to begin cleaning up! Half my disciples were complicit and happy with this and what do I do with them? How do I figure out who enjoyed it and who was just following orders? Why would you allow your sister to become involved with this? I don’t even want to be involved with it and it’s my clan! Even without all that, I don’t know how to be clan head, I don’t,” his voice breaks, “I don’t know how to run a clan.”

There’s a long, stunned silence at that. Even Wei Wuxian seems taken aback. The problem with becoming a young sect leader in a violent manner during a time of relative peace, Jiang Cheng thinks, is that it gives you time to panic.

“I do,” A-jie says quietly.

Jin Zixuan blinks. “What?”

“I helped my mother keep the books even as a child. I help A-Xian arrange training schedules and interview recruits. I help A-Cheng with correspondence and receiving guests. I manage the household of Lotus Pier. I oversee the kitchens and order the disciple uniforms and the training supplies. I teach cultivation history to the younger disciples.” A-jie smiles, her hands clasped too tightly in her lap. “I know how to run a clan. I know how to be a clan head. I can teach you.”

“Lady Jiang,” Jin Zixuan says helplessly, “I don’t understand. What could the Jin possibly give you in return? We have more money than you, but I’ve never thought for a moment that’s something that mattered to you. Even when I didn’t know you at all, I knew that.”

Now A-jie is the one who looks taken aback. “Oh, A-Xuan. You must know. The only thing I want is you.”

If Jin Zixuan starts crying, Jiang Cheng is running away and leaving Wei Wuxian to deal with this.

A-jie is smiling now, so there’s that at least. “Won’t you give me what I want, A-Xuan? Won’t you ask me to be your wife?”

“Yes,” he chokes out, getting to his feet.

A-jie giggles and by mutual agreement Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian spend the next sixty seconds eating their sister’s cooking and not looking up from their plates. Then Wei Wuxian

snaps, “Hey, stop that! No kissing before marriage!”

“We weren’t – I wasn’t,” Jin Zixuan stutters looking horrified.

A-jie is in his arms but Jiang Cheng is pretty sure his sister wouldn’t be shameless enough to kiss Jin Zixuan in front of them. At least until she’s married. Or if she wants to punish them for something. “A-Xian,” she says, raising an eyebrow.

If *all* Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian do is kiss before marriage, Jiang Cheng will consider it some sort of minor miracle.

“It’s different when I do it, I already have a disreputable reputation,” he argues. “Kissing Lan Zhan *improves* it, which in turn improves the Jiang Sect’s reputation. Really, you should be thanking Lan Zhan for kissing me.”

Jiang Cheng doesn’t want to talk about any of his siblings kissing anyone. “Great, okay, let’s move on. If we can hammer out the marriage contract before everyone else gets up, that’d be great. The wedding will be in summer, which should give you more than enough time to get rid of the worst of your clansmen before A-jie is living here permanently.” He pauses, then adds, “You really should get your mother for this part, at least.”

Jin Zixuan’s smile flickers and he shakes his head. “She’s – she said – it’s just not a good idea.”

“You’re not going to negotiate your own marriage contract,” Wei Wuxian says, part statement and part question. “We’ll take you for everything you have. You’re not good at this stuff. I mean, I’m not great either, but I’m better than you at least.”

“You can take everything I have as long as I get Lady Jiang,” he says.

Wei Wuxian gags and Jiang Cheng can’t help but think that this is why people don’t negotiate their own marriage contracts.

They’re still discussing the location of the wedding when the door flings open and Mianmian declares, “Found him!”

“Found who?” Jin Zixuan asks, startled.

“Must you manhandle me?” Jin Guangyao sighs, his upper arm held in Mianmian’s grip. “I came as soon as you asked, there was no reason to drag me.”

Jiang Cheng takes a moment to notice that Jin Guangyao’s hat is gone revealing that his hair is intricately braided in the Nie style and that Mianmian saying that she found him implies he was somewhere other than where she expected him to be, this early in the morning, when everyone else should really still be asleep. Then he consciously decides to stop noticing that and takes another bite of his breakfast.

“You haven’t said anything too terrible, have you?” Mianmian asks. Apparently she really does talk to Jin Zixuan like this and she hadn’t just been messing with him during the clean up of the last battle. “Jiang Yanli, has he been terrible?”

“You really shouldn’t have done this one your own, Sect Leader Jin,” Jin Guangyao says, folding his casualness back behind his customary smooth mask. Jin Zixuan is staring at him, his smile dropped from his face, and Jin Guangyao’s expression becomes a touch more polite and deferential. Jiang Cheng thinks that might be his equivalent of sneering, which explains about sixteen years of confusing interactions. “Of course, I’ll go and retrieve someone suitable to speak on your behalf.”

Mianmian blocks the door, glaring at Jin Zixuan, who blinks and says, “Wait – no, I just – your hair?”

Jin Guangyao raises an eyebrow, but at least now he doesn’t seem as offended. “My hair.”

“Are you going?” he asks. “With Sect Leader Nie? It’s just, you’re handling so much stuff already, and I really don’t know what I’m doing, and I thought that you’d – but of course, your mother’s going with him, and he’s your, well, you know, and I’m sure he’ll want your help with the chief cultivator duties, so.”

He’s getting the impression that maybe Jin Zixuan had always been so quiet out of self preservation rather than just arrogance.

Jin Guangyao is smiling. He goes into a deep bow and says, “I’m happy to stay and assist Sect Leader Jin as long as he has use for me.”

Jiang Cheng wonders if he should be worried about Jin Guangyao killing Jin Zixuan to take his place again. The Nie braids in his hair are telling him no, since it seems when he’s not influenced by Yin Iron, Jin Guangyao is able to tuck aside his murderous urges at least partially because it’ll upset Nie Mingjue. He’ll keep an eye on it anyway. He doesn’t want to have to comfort his sister as a grieving widow a second time.

He’s also a little bit uncertain if appointing Nie Mingjue as the chief cultivator was a good decision, but considering he was their only choice it’s a bit of a moot point. He’s the only leader of a major clan that isn’t new to the point of ridiculousness, and the chief cultivator has to have a major clan behind them. None of the minor clan leader could take it even if they wanted them to. The chief cultivator needs to have the backing of a clan powerful enough to put meaning behind their words, and the minor clans don’t have that. Nie Mingjue does. Especially considering all the Wen territory he’s in charge of and all the Wen refugees he’s taking on. Jiang Cheng is almost worried that maybe the Nie now have too much power, except that considering the three way marriage alliance the Jin, Jiang, and Lan have thanks to his two siblings, he thinks this might just put them back on even footing again.

“Thank you, A-Yao,” Jin Zixuan says and actually sounds like he means it.

Jin Guangyao looks up, surprised at the affectionate name.

“Aw,” Mianmian says. Jin Zixuan glares at her but she only winks. Jiang Cheng hadn’t seen any Jin this playful until Jin Ling had been born. “Okay, it looks like you’ve got this. I’ve got stuff to do.”

She closes the door behind her as Jin Guangyao sits down next his brother, bland smile back in place.

Negotiating a marriage contract with Jin Guangyao doesn't end up being nearly as terrible as he expected it to be. The worst part is the argument he and Wei Wuxian get into about what type of flowers to have at the wedding, which Wei Wuxian eventually ends out coming victorious on. Jiang Cheng wrangles mandatory visits per season to Lotus Pier, which is something Jin Guangshan had laughed in his face about last time, so he's feeling pretty pleased with himself.

The soft, happy expression A-jie wears the entire time doesn't hurt.

~

The dinner at the main hall is tense that night. Even Jiang Cheng is tempted to hide away in the lower hall with his disciples. Maybe next time Li Jun politely requests they trust him less he'll invite him to sit with them in the main hall instead of letting him hide away with the others.

Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen walk towards one another seemingly without thinking about it, then pause, looking at each other and not talking in a way that reminds Jiang Cheng more of the last timeline than this one. If they ended up having *another* falling out over Jin Guangyao he'll – well, do nothing, actually, because that is not his mess to clean up nor is he planning to make it his mess to clean up.

Jin Guangyao must notice the same thing he does because he steps away from Jin Zixuan. He goes to stand in front of both of them. His hair is still in the Nie braids.

"A-Yao," Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue say at once, then don't say anything at all.

He's one hundred percent certain that Jin Guangyao is loving this. "A-Ming. A-Huan."

Oh that last one is *definitely* new. He can tell by how Lan Xichen lights up and Nie Mingjue kind of looks like he wants to break something.

"Are you seeing this?" Jiang Cheng mutters. There's no reply and when he turns it's to see Wei Wuxian no longer by his side and instead sitting with Lan Wangji, not actually in his lap but pretty close. Unbelievable.

They are his sworn brothers. He could go over there and break the tension. That would be the nice to thing to do.

He's looking around for someone to get sacrificed to this awkward situation with him, which means he sees the exact moment that Nie Huaisang walks through with Wen Ning and Wen Qing behind him.

It's not that they're here, because having a representative of the Wens here had been something they'd all discussed for the last time when there's anything really left of the Wen



clan, before they're scattered back among the clans and across the land. It's what they're wearing.

Nie Huaisang must have gone into town to buy these, because it's nothing that any of the Nie would have. They're both in Wen red, in clothes that fit properly, and he smiles before he can think not to. He's not allowed to find her beautiful, but this isn't about that, exactly. It's about walking into a banquet hall full of the people who'd killed the Wen and wearing their colors anyway. Wen Ning goes over to Wei Wuxian, who tears himself from Lan Wangji's side to tug Wen Ning down next to him. He thinks it's probably some form of emotional growth that Lan Wangji doesn't give the impression he wants to commit violence like he had the first time he'd stood there while Mianmian had hugged Wei Wuxian.

Wen Qing walks over to him, raising an eyebrow and waiting. He doesn't know what she's waiting for, so he just raises an eyebrow back. Her cheek pulls in for a second, as if she's biting the inside of it. "Nothing to say about my attire, Sect Leader Jiang? Wen Ning said that we should wear purple."

He snorts. "Wei Wuxian has been running around in red since we were kids. It's never made him less of a Jiang and it won't make you or your people less of one either."

He expects that to be the end of it, but her expression turns subtly colder. He has no idea what in that answer could have pissed her off. "You told me you wouldn't stand against the cultivation world, wouldn't risk your people for mine. How can we trust that we'll be safe in Lotus Pier?"

It's so far from the right way to respond, but he can't help it. He laughs in her face. Her whole body is tense and she must be furious, because even from all the way across the room Wen Ning half risen to his feet. "I won't risk my people for others. Even if it's the right thing to do, I won't, not if it isn't a fight I think we can win, not if we don't have to. But you're not others now, are you? You're going to be *Jiang*. You're joining my clan. You and your people will be my people, and the same protection will apply to you. Wear whatever you want. Keep your name. It doesn't matter. That's not what makes someone Jiang."

She's *looking* at him. He wants her stop. He doesn't know what to do with it. "What makes someone Jiang then, Jiang Cheng?"

"My father always said that it was attempting the impossible," he says. "When I was younger, I didn't understand. I thought it meant *achieving* the impossible, but that's not it. To be Jiang is to try even when maybe you shouldn't. It's showing up. It's doing the work. If what you build collapses, the effort you put into building it isn't wasted." What his brother did last time to save them wasn't wasted even though they died anyway. "I can't make you Jiang by controlling what you wear or changing your name or telling you what to do. You're part of my clan and you're under my protection. But you become Jiang by *wanting* it. You show up. You get to know your neighbors. You heal our people. You train with our instructors. You *try*. It's easy."

Wen Qing is still looking at him, but she's not cold or tense anymore. Her jaw has softened and her dark eyes are almost warm. "That's not easy," she says. "That's the hardest thing you could ask someone to do."

He wishes he had a drink in his hand so he had something to hide behind. “Yeah. Don’t you wish it was something like wearing the right colors and doing as you’re told?”

“No,” she says, and now she is smiling at him, and she’s –

He’s not allowed to find her beautiful.

~

They’re getting ready to head back to Lotus Pier, things as settled as they’re going to get for now, and Jiang Cheng has once again been made useless by his own sister as she handles everything. Last time, A-jie had stayed behind in Jin tower, theoretically to spend more time and get to know Jin Zixuan better and Jiang Cheng hadn’t returned to sign their marriage contract until the next season. This time it’s already signed and A-jie and Jin Zixuan have managed to have more than one decent conversation between them, but their wedding date is the same as it was last time, so. It’s fine. He’s sure it’ll be fine. He’ll get his nephew back soon.

He hopes.

Jiang Cheng turns the corner and has to bite his bottom lip to keep from laughing. Lan Wangji is standing there, Wen Yuan on his hip, looking mildly perplexed, which Jiang Cheng assumes is confused as fuck for everyone else. Or at least that’s what he thinks is happening. It’s a lot harder to know what Lan Wangji is feeling without Wei Wuxian around.

“Got lost?” he asks, and doesn’t clarify which of them he’s asking about.

Lan Wangji glares at him, then says, “Wen Qing gave him to me and asked that Wei Ying look after him. She said that Granny is otherwise occupied.”

“Well, let’s go get him then,” he says after a moment of staring. Lan Wangji has never needed encouragement to chase after Wei Wuxian before.

“My brother requests my assistance,” he says.

“And your response is to just stand in a hallway holding the kid and panicking?” he asks dryly before holding out his hands. “Give him here. You’ll come to Uncle, won’t you? We’ll go find Wei Wuxian.”

He doesn’t realize his slip of tongue until it’s too late, but he pretends like he hasn’t said anything at all. Lan Wangji’s eyebrows twitch, so he definitely noticed. Wen Yuan looks at him dubiously for a moment before holding out his arms and waiting. Jiang Cheng takes him easily, settling the toddler against him like it’s second nature even though this body hasn’t doesn’t yet.

Lan Wangji hesitates for a moment then nods before walking away down the hall.

Wen Yuan, like the rest of the Wens, is in borrowed Jin clothing. He thinks that he’ll look much better in purple. “Let’s go find my brother.”

Wen Yuan nods seriously and wraps his fists in the front of his robes. It's undeniably precious and he presses a quick kiss to the top of his head because there's no one around to make fun of him for it.

Finding his older brother takes him longer than it should, but that's nothing new. Wen Yuan gets more and more restless, but he just bounces him in his arms and keeps looking. He eventually tracks him down in the Jin training grounds demonstrating his new sword forms to Nie Mingjue, Nie Huaisang, and Nie Zonghui. Nie Huaisang is pretending to be bored, but his fan doesn't hide the sharpness of his eyes, and Nie Mingjue and Nie Zonghui are stuck somewhere between incredulous and impressed.

Most people don't invent a whole new sword fighting style with a new blade while helping run a clan right after winning a war. Most people also don't survive losing their golden core or entering the Burial Mounds, never mind coming out the other side of both with a mastery of a newly created form of cultivation. He's not sure why people bother being surprised anymore.

"Wei Wuxian!" he calls out.

His brother smoothly slides Baxia into the scabbard along his back and then turns to wave at him frantically, as if Jiang Cheng hadn't been the one to notice him first. "Jiang Cheng! What are you doing with A-Yuan?"

"A-Yuan, hm?" he teases as he gets close. "Wen Qing asked if you could look after him."

Wen Yuan is already reaching out for him, chubby hands grasping at air, and Wei Wuxian's face softens as he takes him into his arms.

"What you've done is incredible," Nie Mingjue says, nodding at Baxia. There's a nostalgic look in his eyes for a moment as he looks at his old blade before it clears and he says, "I wish you could teach me. I wish you could teach my cultivators."

Wei Wuxian hums, frowning. "I can't leave Lotus Pier now, not with everything going on, but maybe in the future? Or once things settle down, the Jiang could hold classes like the Lan do."

Jiang Cheng ignores the flare at warmth in his chest at hearing Wei Wuxian say he can't leave Lotus Pier. "The Nie could send someone to learn and they could teach the others. Bit of a risk of things getting lost in translation, though. I'll be able to spare Wang Yan before Wei Wuxian and they've been working on it together, so she'll be able to teach it just as well as he will."

"The clans could set up some sort of exchange program, perhaps?" Nie Huaisang offers tentatively from behind his fan. "One that won't end in attempted murder, this time, perhaps."

"Perhaps," Nie Mingjue says, and Jiang Cheng is pretty sure it's just to force Nie Huaisang to duck behind his fan to hide his eyeroll. "Sect Leader Jiang." He raises an eyebrow at his formal title. "Things are bit in flux right now, so it's probably for the best that we have another gathering sooner than we would otherwise."

Jiang Cheng's eyes narrow. "You want to hold it at Lotus Pier?" If Nie Mingjue wanted to hold a meeting somewhere besides the Unclean Realms, he'd think he'd be asking Lan Xichen. Except who knows what's going on with them and Jin Guangyao. He doesn't, he doesn't want to, and he's not going to ask.

Nie Mingjue sighs but says, "Between the added Wen and still working out the best patrols for the Wen territory, getting ready to hold anything for the clans anytime soon will be a strain. However, Lotus Pier is rebuilt, your numbers are almost as high as they were before the war, and you have a strong leadership structure already in place."

Jiang Cheng looks pointedly at Wei Wuxian who rubs at his nose as if it hides his pleased little smile, which it definitely doesn't. "Okay, fine. We'll figure it out."

"We should start doing this often," Wei Wuxian says. "An event hosted by a major clan every season. If we're all going to be – not at each other's throats or paying dumb power games, we should get together regularly to make sure we stay that way. The Lan can host the season after next."

No one says anything about Wei Wuxian volunteering the Lan. He'll ask Lan Wangji who will ask his brother who will say yes.

It's a good idea. They're still talking about it when they walk back into the tower and end up tracking down Jin Zixuan and the Lan brothers to discuss it further. If Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen don't speak directly to each other during it, none of them bring it up.

Maybe Jiang Cheng would get involved if he thought it was going to be an actual problem, but something tells him it won't be. If Jin Guangyao can have two things he wants at once, then he will.

~

In some ways, having the Wens join them is easy, and good, and he has nothing to complain about. The displaced Wens they'd taken in before and had left behind in Lotus Pier are thrilled about seeing more of their people, even if only a few of them even know each other. They have almost no empty homes left in Lotus Pier and with the addition of the Wens their numbers are truly what they were before the war, something that had taken Jiang Cheng a half dozen years to do the first time around. A-Yuan stays stuck to Wei Wuxian, who does a terrible job of pretending he's not just as enamored with A-Yuan as A-Yuan is with him. Granny Wen ends up moving into the main house because of how often Wei Wuxian watches A-Yuan.

They're not the only Wens who move into the main house. It's what he should have expected, maybe. Wen Ning and Wen Qing have always been tangled with Wei Wuxian, even back in Cloud Recesses, and through Wei Wuxian they're involved with him too. Wen Qing, on the top of a mountain with limited medical supplies, cracked open both their chests and put his brother's golden core inside him. Of course they wouldn't just get a house on the edge of the pier.

Of course they end up in rooms in the main house and he sees them everywhere.

Wen Ning is fine. The differences between Wen Ning the alive, human man and Wen Ning the fierce corpse are not many, and he's not sure that those that do exist aren't there either because Wen Ning lived in the Burial Mounds or lived for sixteen years as a prisoner of the Jin. He doesn't know if that should be horrifying or not. It probably just says something about Wei Wuxian's skill as a demonic cultivator.

It takes him longer than he's comfortable with to realize that A-jie is teaching Wen Ning to take her place. Or not her place, exactly, but a place in their household, a place so that when she goes to Jin tower it won't just be him and Wei Wuxian splitting her former duties between them. She teaches Wen Ning how to balance the books and he's good at it. She recommends that he take over teaching some of the archery classes. She teaches him the etiquette of receiving guests on behalf of the clan head. She takes him into town with her and shows him how to order for them and what type of things they need and how to test the quality.

It's not a bad thing. If they asked Li Jun or Wang Yan to do any of this, they'd throw a fit. Or well, Li Jun would smile and nod and die a little more on the inside and Wang Yan would complain and pout in increasingly aggressive ways until he changed his mind. He knows Wen Ning is trustworthy. Wen Ning had saved his life when he'd smuggled him out of Lotus Pier, and actually that's probably why A-jie has chosen him for this in the first place.

The problem isn't Wen Ning.

It's that Wen Qing won't stop looking at him.

She's always there, at meals and in the hallways. She treats everyone's training injuries and soon knows most of the disciples by name. She goes down to town to buy her medical herbs herself instead of sending a servant and soon the merchants come up to the steps to bring things to her personally. She sits in on talisman classes and archery lessons. She drinks with Wei Wuxian and laughs with A-jie.

She's taken over the healer's building and Jiang Cheng had expected to have to sooth some ruffled feathers over the whole thing, but instead he'd gotten every medic in there chattering excitedly about her knowledge and her ideas and really, one of the Wen doctors, in the flesh! Wen Ning helps his sister too, but he's better suited household management than medicine and doesn't have any problem with that. So it's just Wen Qing, quietly reorganizing everything from how patients are received to how the storage cabinets are arranged. Jiang Cheng sends letters to the other clans asking for copies of their advanced medical books and scrolls and when he gets them back he leaves them in Wen Qing's office, knowing she's overhauled their medical library and there's no point in trying to put them on the shelves himself. She smiles at him at breakfast the next day, which isn't that rare, but still makes him fumble and drop his spoon, spattering the mess on his robes.

The first time A-Yuan turns to Wei Wuxian and calls him Baba, Wen Qing looks to him, her eyes so fond and pleased he can't even make himself look away to tease his crying brother about telling Lan Wangji that he's a father now.

She's driving him mad and he doesn't know what to do about it.

It's late. The only person awake besides him and is probably Wei Wuxian, who's been forgoing sleep to work on his talismans and strange inventions. He'll be leading the cultivation conference next month about the creative application of talismans and sigils. Jiang Cheng is hoping displaying how much of a nerd his brother is and how helpful the things he creates are will help dispel the last of the angry mutterings about him. He doesn't need everyone to like his brother, he just needs them to shut up about it.

He's outside, watching the lazy patterns of flowers in the lotus pond that he can still see by moonlight. It's as cold as it ever gets in Lotus Pier, which isn't very, at least compared to Cloud Recesses and the Unclean Realms. He can't sleep. He could go annoy Wei Wuxian, who's no stranger to not sleeping even when he doesn't have an excuse like the conference. He could lay down on his brother's bed and listen to him explain things that Jiang Cheng doesn't have a hope of understanding and he'd probably manage to drift off like that. It'd be the smart thing to do, since he has to be up early like always, but instead he stays outside even though it's just a little bit too cold for it and watches the moonlight in the pond's reflection.

"Isn't this past your bedtime?"

He startles, looking down to see Wen Qing standing right next to him. Her hair is pulled back in a simple ponytail but there are strange divots in it around her skull, like she kept running her hands through it without thinking to take it out. She has deep bruises under her eyes and he thinks her over robe has to be Wen Ning's by the way it's nearly swallowing her. He's not allowed to think she's beautiful, but sometimes it's very hard not to.

"What are you doing?" he asks, hating the plaintive note in his voice.

"Just got out of surgery." His alarm must be obvious because she softens and says, "Huang Mei's pregnancy had some complications. She and her daughter are fine."

It takes him a moment to place the name with a face. Huang Mei is the blacksmith who forges their cultivation swords. She's been churning them out steadily without complaint or loss of quality even though their demand had become rather ridiculous when they'd started recruiting. He'd known she was pregnant, but it seems like only yesterday she'd been grinning at him over a sparking forge with a flat stomach while her husband fretted in the background. Surely it couldn't be time for the baby already, although it obviously was.

He takes a deep breath, feeling old suddenly, two lifetimes rounding his shoulders in the dark where there's no one to see him but her. "Wen Qing. What are you *doing*?"

She's frowning, but her eyes aren't, and it's worse, somehow. "I'm showing up."

He can only stare. There are words caught in his throat, but they won't come out.

"I'm showing up," she repeats, and she hasn't moved but she's too close, close enough that touching her would be as easier as not touching her. "I'm trying. I want it. I want," she pauses, looking at him, always looking at him, and says again, "I want."

He knows what she's saying. He wishes he didn't, that for a moment he was as dense as his idiot brother. "Why?"

"You're different than I thought you'd be," she says. "I wish I'd kept the comb you gave me."

He shakes his head, his eyes burning, his throat burning, all of him burning in a way that the chilly air won't sooth. "No. I'm not, and you shouldn't have. You were right to give it back. I didn't – I asked you to abandon your family, people you'd sworn to protect, even though I never would do the same. I'm not – I wouldn't have helped them if things had happened differently, do you understand? If things were less sympathetic, less in your favor, I wouldn't have helped you. If Wei Wuxian hadn't forced my hand, they would have slaughtered your family and I would have helped rather than risk the Jiang. You don't understand." A truth he never wanted to confront crawls its way passed his lips, "They would have burned you and I would have let them."

He likes to think if he'd been there when she'd burned, he would have stopped it. But he knows better. He can't stand the idea of her thinking he's something he's not, of her thinking he's someone worth caring about when all the good he's done her has just been a part of keeping his family alive and safe.

"I know," she says, as calm as ever. "That's why I like you."

He stares.

"You'd do anything to save your people. You'd sacrifice every moral, commit ever misdeed, and fall asleep every night without a regret if it meant keeping them safe. You'd let the world burn if it meant the safety of those that mattered to you and fuck everyone else." She steps that much closer, almost touching him. She has to tilt her head back to look him in the eye. "What about that am I not supposed to understand?"

Oh.

She'd worked for Wen Ruohan, after all. She'd been loyal to him for most of the war because her people's lives had been held in the balance. Wen Qing had been faced with the same sort of problem he'd been the first time and made the same choice. Anything to save their people. Fuck everyone else.

"When you asked me to leave my family for the safety of your protection, I thought that you didn't get it. But you do." She's so close. "If you give me another comb, I'll wear it."

He wants to press his thumb against the darkness under her eyes. He wants to run his hands through her hair until it lies properly. He wants to see her tired and hair askew in one of his over robes.

"Okay," he says, hoarse.

She pokes him in the side before she goes, her fingers like steel, and says, "Get some sleep. You have to be up early tomorrow."

This time when he says, “Okay,” she’s already gone.

~

He considers asking either A-jie or Wei Wuxian to help him before coming to the conclusion that neither of them would ever let him live it down. He should probably give her something in red, but instead he presents her with a jade and amethyst comb and says, “It belonged to my mother.”

Wen Qing walks around Lotus Pier with Madam Yu’s comb in her hair. Everyone knows what it means.

“At least you have good taste,” Wei Wuxian says. “Hers is shit though. Should we let her talk to the matchmaker about you?”

He’s so glad Wei Wuxian has a sword in this timeline because it means there’s nothing to stop him from unsheathing Sandu and attempting to beat his brother to death.

Something tense in A-jie seems to uncoil and she slides into his room one morning to do his hair and tell him, “I was worried about leaving you. You and A-Xian do a good job of taking care of each other, but soon he’ll be spending half the year in Gusu. But this is good. Now you’ll have A-Qing to take care of and she’ll be able to take care of you too.”

“A-jie,” he says helplessly, “it’s not – we haven’t.” Nothing and everything has changed. She still goes about her day the same way, except she sits next to him at meals and they’ll do their paperwork side by side and now when he can’t sleep he’ll go to her room and even if she’s not awake he’ll lie on the floor next to her bed and match his breaths to hers until he falls asleep and even when he wakes up with an ache in his neck from sleeping on the floor it’s still the best night of sleep he’s ever had. He still hasn’t kissed her. It doesn’t seem like something he should be allowed to do.

She finishes tying off his hair and asks simply, “Why not?”

It’s a good question. He doesn’t have an answer.

Wen Qing is filling out patient files when he sits down across from her and asks, “Are we – do you want to – it’s okay if you don’t.”

Her lips twitch at the corners and she doesn’t look up from her report. “Yes. I’ll marry you.”

He thinks now would be a good time to kiss her except she got a wet brush in her hand and if he makes her mess up these reports she’ll be pissed so instead he waits until she’s done and wiped off the brush to say, “If you want to wait to-”

She leans across the desk to grab the front of his robes and pull him closer, and closer, until her lips are on his and they’re as close as they can get unless he climbs over the desk, which he’d do except her reports are still wet with ink. She’s warm and soft and small, her fingers clutching his chin so tightly he thinks she’ll leave bruises behind.

~



They don't need wedding negotiations really. There's very little to negotiate and what there is, neither of them care all that strongly about.

But A-jie and Wei Wuxian sit him in one corner and A-Qing in the other. Wen Ning and Granny sit opposite them over a pot of tea. A-Yuan is in Wei Wuxian's lap which Wen Ning declares an unfair advantage. They take it all very seriously, even when he and A-Qing roll their eyes in unison. They decide on an autumn wedding if only because he can't get married in the same season as one of his siblings and Wei Wuxian will be married in spring and A-jie in the summer. It's a good thing that both the Lan and Jin had insisted on paying for so much of their respective weddings because three weddings in three seasons would strain on any clan's budget.

His siblings are here, alive and well and soon to be married. The Wens are scattered, but safe. Jin Guangyao probably isn't going to be going on any murder sprees anytime soon. For once all four of the major clans are actually getting along.

He's not proud of himself for a lot of things, but he's proud of this. He did this.

Granny and Wei Wuxian are trying to shout over each other about the appropriate number of courses to be served. A-jie is smiling in a way that isn't comforting at all. Wen Ning has that same smile, which he definitely learned from her.

A-Qing catches his eye and raises an eyebrow, nothing to give away she's anything but exasperated except for the way her lips twitch up at the corners.

He smiles back, looking at the bruises under her eyes and his mother's comb in her hair and the callouses on her hands.

She's beautiful.

He's allowed to think she's beautiful.

## Chapter End Notes

yay! now we just have a vignette epilogue thing. basically we're going to speed run through 16 years of significant moments

i hope you liked it!

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# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They end up having to set up a committee to deal with what the cultivation world is calling the Jiang weddings. Jiang Cheng thinks it's all too much fuss, but no one is listening to him. Apparently having the sect leader, sect heir, and second heir all getting married within a year, especially when the latter two are getting married to the Lan clan heir and Jin clan leader respectively, gets people talking.

They want A-jie to have a grand wedding. But he and Wei Wuxian are seriously considering just grabbing their fiances and eloping. Except he can't elope, because then people will think he's ashamed of marrying a Wen, and anyone who so much as hints that he should be is going to become intimately acquainted with Zidian.

"Lan Zhan and I can bow to each other anywhere," Wei Wuxian tries. "As long as you and Shijie are there, what does the rest matter?"

If only it were that easy. "No way. If I have to deal with all this, then so do you."

Wei Wuxian's wedding is first. Jiang Cheng had thought holding the wedding at Cloud Recesses would end up meaning that it was plain, but apparently he'd let the Lan's three thousand rules distract him from their hundreds of layers of silk robes and stupidly elaborate hair pieces.

It's ornate enough to have been done by the Jin, if not nearly as ostentatious. Cloud Recesses is transformed, light blue and purple lanterns and decor and flowers covering nearly every inch of it. Wei Wuxian wears red for the first time since Jiang Cheng's ascension ceremony. Lan Xichen had offered to make Wei Wuxian his own elaborate Lan headpiece in gold for the ceremony, but he'd insisted on wearing his lotus hair ornament, even though the amethyst clashed with the red. Jiang Cheng pretends it doesn't matter at all even though it clearly he does. He also pretends he doesn't cry during the wedding because why would he, it's just his stupid older brother's dumb wedding, and A-Qing must really love him because she waits until after the ceremony to make fun of him for it.

His brother and Lan Wangji move into Wei Wuxian's rooms and Jiang Cheng does everything he can to ignore them for the first month, then he makes Wei Wuxian help him with A-jie's wedding planning. He'd wondered, vaguely, how Lan Wangji would fit in at Lotus Pier, but the answer ends up being extremely well. He takes over teaching the history courses from A-jie and assists in the advanced sword fighting so Wei Wuxian is only teaching the beginners and those advanced enough to learn his own sword patterns. Pretty much everyone is calling it the Wei style which mortifies his brother enough that Jiang Cheng does everything he can to encourage it.

They both sob through A-jie's wedding. A-Qing and Lan Wangji look equally unimpressed with both of them. It's a strange thought that the two of them actually get along rather well.

Sometime between his brother's wedding and now, Jin Guangyao must have gotten bored at being the center of Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue's jealousy, because the two of them are back to having their easy rapport and Jin Guangyao wears a blue ribbon intertwined amongst his Nie braids. He thinks it means something, that Nie Mingjue had loved Jin Guangyao so well that he'd known the instant he was corrupted by a darkness not his own and Lan Xichen had loved Jin Guangyao so much that he'd loved him despite that darkness. Lan Xichen is more like his brother than he'd like to think.

Sometime between A-jie's wedding and his own, Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue have move on from their easy rapport to being as disgusting with each other as they are with Jin Guangyao. He complains about it to A-Qing until she bows her head over her book to hide the fact she's smiling.

"Aren't you friends with them?" Wen Ning asks, mystified. "You go out drinking together every time you're all in the same place, saying it's a sworn brothers thing."

Wen Ning is a fellow little brother, who will soon be his little brother, so he says, "There has to be drinking otherwise I can't stand to be around them, and it's mostly so Jin Guangyao and I can get back at Wei Wuxian and Jin Zixuan for taking them to have older brother only meetings. I know all they do is bitch about us the entire time."

He thinks a younger brothers only meeting in retaliation would be pretty funny, but it means hanging out with Jin Guangyao, Lan Wangji, and Nie Huaisang all at once, which sounds like the absolute worse combination of people he could think to put together.

Lotus Pier is filled with the entire cultivation world, which surely must be getting tired of all these high profile weddings, except that they're not because cultivators are secretly all hedonists.

A-jie and Wei Wuxian are watching him, proud and tearful and here alive, as he bows three times to A-Qing and is bowed to three times in return. She always looks good in red, but he thinks this is favorite, the shade of red she wears on their wedding day.

The celebrations last a week, marking the end of the Jiang weddings and the marriage of Wen Qing to Jiang Cheng.

~

In the end, he's surprised it takes as long as it does.

Wei Wuxian gets hurt during a night hunt. It's not fatal, not while they're at Lotus Pier and A-Qing is here to yank her brother in law from the edge of death. Jiang Cheng picks up his brother's wrist to feed spiritual energy into him, so the bleeding slows and the wounds stubbornly begin to heal. Lan Wangji has that look of pale faced terror that he only gets when his husband or children are in danger and he reaches for Wei Wuxian's wrist to do the same. "No," Jiang Cheng says and Lan Wangji jerks back. He holds out his other hand to Lan Wangji. "If you want it to do him any good, you'll have to give it to me first."

A-Qing stills. She's surprised but not shocked. "He said he didn't tell you."

“Tell you what?” Lan Wangji demands.

“You can ask him later,” he says. “If you try and give him spiritual energy yourself, it won’t work. You have to give it to me first then I’ll give it to him.”

Lan Wangji shakes his head in confusion but A-Qing quietly says, “He’s right,” and he doesn’t argue, instead grabbing Jiang Cheng’s wrist to feed his spiritual energy into him instead.

Wei Wuxian’s body recognized the spiritual energy generated by his own golden core but not any foreign energy. Cultivators can borrow spiritual energy from others because it passes through the recipient’s golden core automatically, changed by this process until it resembles the spiritual energy their golden cores produce on their own, making it something the recipient can use. Wei Wuxian doesn’t have his golden core anymore. The only spiritual energy that can help him is from Jiang Cheng, and even that affect is limited without a golden core of his own.

Lan Wangji is as much of genius as Wei Wuxian. He doesn’t know how, but it doesn’t take him long to figure out why, his hand trembling on Jiang Cheng’s skin.

“I didn’t ask it of him,” he says quietly, looking at his brother rather than whatever horrible expression is on Lan Wangji’s face right now. “I didn’t even know he’d done it until a while after it happened. He tricked me.”

“We tricked you,” A-Qing says softly.

He shrugs. Maybe he should be mad at her, but it was so long ago and, well. In another life, he let her burn. They can be even.

“I know,” Lan Wangji says and Jiang Cheng is too surprised to keep himself from looking at him. “You would do anything for Wei Ying. I didn’t think you’d let him do this willingly.”

He’s never had Lan Wangji’s good opinion before. He’s not sure what to do with it.

It’s late enough to be early. A-Qing has gone to bed and Lan Wangji is asleep half slumped over Wei Wuxian’s bed, refusing to go get some proper rest in their room and instead holding vigil in the infirmary. Jiang Cheng can’t even make fun of him for it because, well, he’s here too after all. Wen Ning had distracted A-Yuan, saying his fathers were on a night hunt, which won’t work two days in a row, but it won’t have to.

Wei Wuxian lets out a little huff of breath that’s not enough to be groan. His eyes open slowly and he smiles when he sees Jiang Cheng. “Hi. Uh. Oops?”

“Oops,” he says dryly. Lan Wangji is either still asleep or doing a very good job at pretending, so he says, “Lan Wangji knows about your golden core.”

He stills, eyes wide and afraid, before he licks his lips and says, “Did – how do you – was it Wen Qing?”

He shakes his head and says gently, "I've known for a while now." He reaches out to smooth the line of worry from his brother's brow. "It's okay. I wish you hadn't done it. I'd give it back if I didn't think going through that again would kill us both."

Wei Wuxian's fear has softened into wariness. "You really must have known for a while. You're being very calm about this."

"I wasn't at first," he says dryly. "I was pissed. I can yell at you later if you like."

"But you're not pissed now?" he clarifies, still vulnerable, about this one last thing that he thought Jiang Cheng might hate him over. Because he's always known this wasn't something his brother would have wanted and he'd done it anyway.

Jiang Cheng had been very angry, rightfully so, for a very long time. But he doesn't have any room for that here now, in this life he's built with the people he loves, when Wei Wuxian has just nearly died in front of him again. So he just says, "No more than usual. Just promise me you won't do anything that stupid again. I know you can't help throwing yourself headfirst into danger," he pointedly looks to the wound across his chest, "but don't be careless with your own life. Too many people are relying on you to stick around."

In the old timeline, Wei Wuxian would have looked to Lan Wangji then. But in this one he smiles and keeps his eyes on Jiang Cheng and says, "I know."

~

A-Yuan becomes a Lan and gains the courtesy name Sizhui. It's not a surprise because that's what's in Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's marriage treaty. The Jiang have no name uniformity in their clan, while the Lan do. It makes sense for their children to be named Lan so there will be no need for them to change it regardless of what clan they end up choosing.

A-jie announces she's pregnant. The timing is right. It's fine. This is fine.

These are things he expected. What he hoped for.

It somehow escaped his notice that some changes beget others.

"You're," he starts, then stops, can only stare with his hands outstretched, not quite touching her. She's never been breakable for a moment, not even too thin and furious in grief when she'd stepped into the Jin banquet hall, but now he's suddenly scared to touch her.

"Yes," she says, taking his unstretched hand and placing it against her stomach. "You won't be able to feel anything for a few more months."

He's been a father before. It's foolish to think he'd been anything less to Jin Ling the first time around, but this time Jin Zixuan is alive, A-jie is alive, and he'll love their children just as fiercely as before, but their relationship will be different. It's a good thing. Their kids will have all the family that Jin Ling should have had, his parents and Wei Wuxian, Wen Ning and Wen Qing, even Lan Wangji and a not crazy version of Jin Guangyao. But Jiang Cheng had thought that he'd miss miss being a father.

He spreads his hand against her stomach and leans down to kiss her as gently as she'll let him.

~

A-jie places his nephew in his arms and Jiang Cheng looks down at that little squalling scrunched up face and *knows*. This is Jin Ling.

He has his nephew back.

“Are you crying?” Wei Wuxian demands, peering over his shoulder and making grabby hands at him. “Let me hold my nephew! It’s my turn, Jiang Cheng!”

A-jie is still in bed, leaning against Jin Zixuan who’s got the soppiest expression on his face that Jiang Cheng has ever seen on anyone, and he lives with Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji half the year. “A-Xian, be patient. A-Ling isn’t going anywhere.”

He rolls his eyes and gently places Jin Ling in his brother’s arms, something he’d never gotten to do the first time around, and has to stop himself from crying all over again.

Wei Wuxian coos down at him, supporting his head properly and everything. Jiang Cheng has no idea when Wei Wuxian got the chance to learn how to hold a baby, but he looks good like that. He’s pretty sure Lan Wangji agrees, if the stupidly soft look on his face is any indication. Jiang Cheng figures right then that Jin Ling is going to be getting another Lan cousin.

“Wei Wuxian,” A-Qing says, a look on her face making it clear that his brother better hand over that baby right now. She’s five months along and much bigger than A-jie had been, although of course Jiang Cheng hasn’t told her that, and her pregnancy hasn’t done a thing to make her less intimidating.

“Sorry, Wen Qing,” Wei Wuxian says, “but maternal uncles, then fraternal, then spouses. It’s the *law*.”

“It is not,” she huffs, but doesn’t put up any fight while Wei Wuxian transfers Jin Ling to Jin Guangyao’s arms.

Jin Ling makes some discontent sounds, obviously not thrilled at being passed around so many people when he’s barely a day old, but Jin Guangyao settles him easily, something confident and practiced in his easy motions. He must register their surprise because he flushes and says, “Plenty of prostitutes have children. Someone needed to mind them while their mothers were working.”

Jin Guangyao speaks of his origins without flinching these days. He’d grown up in the brothel with his mother until he was thirteen, until he was too beautiful to stay. Jin Guangshan hadn’t been the first person Meng Yanmei had killed in defense of her son.

“You’re good at it,” Wei Wuxian says. “Are you going to have any of your own?”

His face twitches. “No. At the rate you all are going, I imagine I’ll have more than enough nieces and nephews to occupy my time.”

That seems like a political answer to a political problem. That he’s involved with both the Lan and Nie sect leaders is less a secret than something no one ever talks about, because what is there to say, really. Raising children with either or both would be nearly impossible.

“Mm,” Wei Wuxian hums, sounding for a moment so much like his husband that Jiang Cheng twitches. “Lan Zhan and I will work really hard to give you more nieces and nephews, won’t we, Lan Zhan?”

Lan Wangji’s ears turn red and that sets off a wave of laughter.

~

Wei Wuxian returns to Lotus Pier and leaves Lan Wangji behind, the two of them apart for more than a quick trip for the first time since their wedding.

“You don’t need to do this,” he tries, but he knows it doesn’t come off very convincing when he’s wearing yesterday’s robes and there’s damp spot on his elbow and he’s not sure if it’s ink from falling asleep at his desk or something worse.

“Lan Zhan has responsibilities in Gusu, he needed to stay,” his brother says, hands on his hips. “I have responsibilities here and I need to be here. Lan Zhan and I are okay. A-Yuan is okay. Now, I’m begging you, leave me with my nieces and go take a bath. For everyone’s sake.”

One baby had been exhausting. Two ends up being something far past exhausting that he doesn’t have the words for. Nuying and Ninghong are perfect and beautiful and make him long for the nights he spent walking up and down Lotus Pier with a colicky Jin Ling.

The problem is that he and A-Qing are far too busy and needed to ignore all their responsibilities to focus on being parents, but balancing their daughter’s needs with being Madam Jiang and Sect Leader Jiang is driving him mad and A-Qing to a level of irritation he’s never seen from her nor does he ever want to see from her again.

Having his brother here makes everything instantly more bearable. Wen Ning has taken on almost all the medical administrative tasks from A-Qing, even writing patients reports that she dictates to him while holding one child and keeping sharp eyes on the other, but there’s no one in Lotus Pier who can really do the same for him.

Wei Wuxian can and does. He smoothly slides into the role of sect leader, sitting on the lotus throne and dealing with the brunt of Jiang Cheng’s duties while he focuses on his daughters, and then switches back, taking care of the twins when Jiang Cheng needs to work. Winter comes and he’s still here, then spring, then summer. Lan Wangji comes and goes when he can and they keep Lan Sizhui mostly to their normal schedule, even if it means he spends time in Gusu with Lan Wangji alone. Neither his brother’s husband nor his son like spending time apart from him if they can help it and Lan Wangji gets a lot of practice flying his sword while holding his son.

Jiang Cheng feels worse about this than possibly anything else, but still Wei Wuxian doesn't budge, insisting that it's only for a couple months and then Lan Sizhui and Lan Wangji will be back at Lotus Pier full time. Lan Wangji doesn't seem upset about it like Jiang Cheng thought he would be.

For the first year of the twin's lives, Wei Wuxian is there, working with Wen Ning to make sure he and A-Qing come out the other side of it in one piece.

It's halfway through autumn when Wei Wuxian deems their shit to be sufficiently together and gets ready to fly back to Gusu. He's giving Nuying and Ninghong loud exaggerated kisses on their cheeks and then does the same thing to Wen Ning and A-Qing. He's probably just used up the year of goodwill he built with A-Qing all at once. He tries to do the same thing with Jiang Cheng but he puts his hand over his brother's face and shoves him away.

Wei Wuxian pouts, but it's clear that he's laughing at him. Jiang Cheng walks him to the edge of Lotus Pier and then thinks of the past year, of Wei Wuxian not leaving even though it meant time away from his own family and his duties in Cloud Recesses, how not only hadn't he needed to ask for this but his brother hadn't even left when he'd told him to. "A-Xian," he says, "thank you."

Wei Wuxian's surprise is soft and warm rather than painful, because his brother doesn't need a nickname to know that he loves him. "You're welcome, A-Cheng."

But it doesn't hurt.

~

He's drinking with Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, and Jin Guangyao. They're in Lotus Pier and their annual event is a night hunt this year. It doesn't start until tomorrow night which means there's nothing to stop them from drinking now.

"I've been thinking," Jin Guangyao says, looking up from under his eyelashes. Jiang Cheng resists the urge to run away. "I think you should get married."

Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue freeze and Jiang Cheng starts drinking faster.

"Not to me, of course, I'm far too busy helping my brother," he continues blithely.

Jiang Cheng snorts. "That's a funny way to say running the Jin sect. Well, half running it. Three quarters? However much my sister isn't doing these days."

Jin Guangyao goes very wide eyed and faintly offended. He knows it's fake and he still feels kind of bad. "Sect Leader Jiang!"

"Seriously," he goes on, "we all know it. *He* knows it and it's not like he's complaining. Does he do anything useful?"

"Well," Jin Guangyao says, "sometimes elders or clansmen won't listen, and he'll say things like 'Do as my wife says' and 'Follow A-Yao's recommendation' and then they do and I find that very useful."



Jin Zixuan does a great job of training his disciples. Jin Guangyao and A-jie do a great job of handling everything else.

“Anyway,” he says, waving his hand in a way that reminds him of Nie Huaisang. “You’re both sect leaders and it’s time you have wives and children. Look at Jiang Cheng, married to a very scary woman with two horrifying children.”

“Hey,” he says, but without much heat. His daughters are kind of awful. He doesn’t know where they got it from. Wei Wuxian, probably. He also understands why Jin Guangyao is having this conversation here and now rather than literally any other time. He wants Jiang Cheng here as a prop.

Lan Xichen looks like something approaching heartbroken, which is a terrible sight and the closest he’s seen Lan Xichen look to when he killed Jin Guangyao, but Nie Mingjue is just deeply amused. “I assume that since you’re bringing it up, you’ve already picked our brides?”

“You know me so well, A-Ming,” he says. “A-Huan, I think Qin Su would make a lovely Madame Lan. She won’t chafe under the rules and is a wonderful entertainer. She’s not a strong cultivator, but she’s clever and the Lan are not usually overly volatile. She’ll be able to hold your seat so that both you and Lan Wangji can be away from Gusu for longer periods of time.”

Lan Xichen’s face clears. “A-Yao are you – I mean-”

“Mianmian for you,” Jin Guangyao says to Nie Mingjue. “You could probably just hand the whole sect over to her if you’d like. Actually, I’d keep an eye on her, because I think possibly she just agreed because she thought it would be a challenge.”

“Hey, hold on,” Jiang Cheng protests hotly. “If Mianmian is leaving the Jin, I want her in the Jiang. And she’s A-jie’s best friend and the Jin’s first disciple, are she and Jin Zixuan really okay with this?”

“Mianmian is the first disciple, the dear friend of the clan head and his wife, and she’s bored,” Jin Guangyao says. “She finds the Jin Clan stifling, even now, but she loves the people, so she doesn’t leave. It’s not like she’s going to become less skilled and strong and intelligent over time, so she’ll only become more bored. If she’s Madame Nie, she won’t be bored.”

Lan Xichen nods seriously, but his eyes are sparkling. “And if Nie Mingjue and I have wives who can run our clans for us then we can spend more time together with you.”

“I suppose so,” he says, “if that’s how you wanted to spend your time.”

It’s not subtle but he’s not trying to be, not with them. Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen are looking at Jin Guangyao in a way that makes his skin crawl, as if him arranging their marriage to women they barely know is just the most adorable thing and not further proof that Yin Iron or no Yin Iron, he’s crazy. Lan Xichen puts his hand on Jin Guangyao’s thigh and Nie Mingjue touches the blue ribbon in his braids.

“No, nope, no way,” Jiang Cheng says, pushing himself to his feet and only swaying a little. “Stop being disgusting. I’m going to find A-Qing, she’d never do this to me.”

Nie Mingjue snorts. “You don’t want to deal with affection so you’re going to go find your wife?”

“You have met her, right?” he asks and snatches another bottle of the wine Lan Xichen had brought before leaving them to do whatever it is they do together. These meetings suck because they can never keep their hands off each other for long and then he has to run away in self defense.

A-Qing is still awake, the candles burning in her office. He makes too much noise coming in, but she only sighs when he clumsily sits on the ground next to his chair. “Are your sworn brothers being mean to you again?”

She’s mocking him but he doesn’t care. “Next time I’m making them sit in separate corners like the girls in time out.”

“A reasonable course of action,” she says, in that particular tone of voice that means she thinks he’s an idiot. But she does scoot her chair back a couple of inches so he can press his forehead against her knees, so he’s pretty sure it evens out.

~

A-jie is pregnant again. She asks them if they’re thinking of having more children and A-Qing says, “No,” before Jiang Cheng can fully process the way cold horror had swept through him. The twins are barely toddlers and he imagines it’s only going to get worse from here. Ninghong had spent a whole afternoon collecting frogs and released them in the middle of counsel meeting. Nuying had somehow gotten into the weapons room last week and now they have to keep it sealed with talismans. He’s not going to survive the children he has, why would he want more?

It seems like Jin Wen has just been born when A-jie announces that she’s pregnant again, and then Jin Ling is the oldest brother to one brother and one little girl, Jin Xia.

Jiang Cheng isn’t all that surprised to hear soon after that Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji have adopted a baby girl of their own. Lan Wangji had probably agreed in sheer self defense of Wei Wuxian leaving to look after his nieces and nephews again. Lan Suyin is as quiet and easy as Lan Sizhui had been and clearly there is no justice in this world that his disaster of a brother has ended up with two perfectly well behaved children. He can’t even blame the Lan influence, since their eldest came that way.

~

“Mianmian moved her boyfriend into the main hall last week,” Nie Huaisang tells him at the cultivation conference held at the Unclean Realms.

Jiang Cheng hadn’t seen any boyfriend when she’d walked in on Nie Mingjue’s arm but it’s not like he’d been looking for one. Also the roundness of her stomach had been pretty

distracting. “Is the kid his or Nie Mingjue’s?”

“Who knows? Who cares?” Nie Huaisang snaps his fan out to hide his face. “It’ll be the Nie heir either way. You know my brother sleeps in sometimes now? Even A-Yao can’t get him to do that. Mianmian can have as many boyfriends as she wants, she’s doing wonders for my brother’s blood pressure.”

Mianmian, surprising no one, had taken to running a sect like she’d been born to do it and fits it in with the brusque, militant Nie with surprising ease. He thinks that she and Nie Mingjue might actually be – well, the thing is that baby is very possibly Nie Mingjue’s, is the point. Qin Su has done a wonderful job as Madame Lan, easing the burden from both the Twin Jades of Lan and Lan Qiren, but she also sleeps in the house next to Lan Xichen’s rather than sharing his and is by all accounts perfectly happy to do so. They’d adopted a child instead of having one together, Lan Jingyi, who’s quickly taken the place of Lan Sizhui’s best friend. He remembers Lan Jingyi from before but not well, and certainly not well enough to remember if he’d had living parents the last time around. It doesn’t do him any good to think on it either way, so he doesn’t.

“Do you think it’s a good or bad thing that we’re having all our kids so close together?” he asks.

“What we?” Nie Huaisang asks. “Leave me out of it. Just because you and your siblings refused to let a spring pass without announcing a new family member doesn’t mean the rest of us are having the same problem.”

He flushes but protests, “We didn’t plan it, really! It’s just, well,” he hesitates.

“You all want a big family,” Nie Huaisang says kindly, “so that’s what you’ve made. I’m very happy for you. I’ll be over in the Unclean Realms with my fans and my one niece or nephew who may or may not be my brother’s kid.”

He rolls his eyes because Nie Huaisang has whole heartedly embraced his role of strange uncle, dropping in whenever he feels like it to rile up the kids, give them ridiculous gifts, then leaving the parents to deal with the aftermath.

~

His daughters look identical, down to the one freckle they have on their left shoulders, but their appearance is where their similarities end. Ninghong is sweet and quiet until she’s angry, which fits the profile for half their family. Nuying is too much like him, too much like his mother. She burns too hot and fury takes all the sense from her head. It’s familiar. He recognizes it easily. She’ll wield Zidian well one day if he doesn’t drop her in the lake first.

As much of a headache her arrogance and her rage are, he can’t help but be a little bit grateful for it, in a strange way he doesn’t want to examine too closely. Nuying loves all her family, of course, no matter how she grumbles, but Wei Wuxian is the one she never grumbles about. When she hates everything around her, including herself, she doesn’t hate Wei Wuxian.

Which means his brother can cheerfully slice through talismans blocking her room and duck inside without getting his head bitten off for his efforts. His daughters as teenagers almost makes him miss them as babies.

*Almost.*

There is something about this that warms him regardless of his beloved daughter turning traitor. Nuying is the most like Madame Yu in terms of temperament, but instead of hating Wei Wuxian she loves him, he's her favorite, and he doesn't know if means anything to Wei Wuxian, but it means something to him.

~

Lan Sizhui is the eldest of the cousins while Lan Suyin is the youngest. They both have a complex about it, which Jiang Cheng thinks is only fair. If Wei Wuxian's kids stay entirely perfect forever Jiang Cheng is going to go grey at the unfairness of it all.

Truly the kids are all close enough in age that it's no wonder that people think they really did plan it that way. Unfortunately, they're all sect heirs, and one day in the future the Nie are going to be only ones who can get away with pretending to have any dignity. Not that they will have any, because Mianmian's daughter is clever and strong and loves causing mischief, but she can pull an innocent face so convincing that she must have learned it from her Uncle Yao. Or her Aunt Meng, or her Uncle Nie, and really, *no one* should be surprised at how this kid is turning out. Not technically being part of The Cousins, as they are rather notoriously known through the sects, doesn't mean Nie Mianmian isn't close and beloved and included in their ridiculous group. It does mean that she has plausible deniability.

Jiang Cheng thinks those may have even been her first words. He also sometimes wonders if he should start calling Mianmian her actual name, since now her daughter and hers are the same. But Wei Wuxian still calls her Mianmian, even during official events where he should really call her Madame Nie, which is all it takes for the rest of them to do the same.

"Should we do something about that?" Wei Wuxian asks, leaning against Lan Wangji's side and gesturing to the squabbling children. They're far too old for it to be cute. They're nearly adults.

A-jie smiles serenely and says, "No." Jin Zixuan snorts but doesn't protest.

"It's good for them to get their energy out now," Wen Ning says.

"It's good for us for them to get their energy out now," A-Qing corrects.

Wen Ning nods, eyes wide. "Yes."

There's a particularly loud screech and they look over at the commotion.

"Just because you're the first disciple in the Lan doesn't mean I won't push you into the lotus pond," Jin Ling threatens loudly. "You're my cousin, it really doesn't matter. You could be the Lan Sect Leader and when you're in Lotus Pier you're *still* getting pushed into the pond."

“Jingyi is going to be the Lan sect leader, not me,” Lan Sizhui retorts, staying just out of reach. “Whereas you *are* going to be the Jin sect leader one day, so maybe if anyone should be acting with a little more dignity, it should be you.”

“You!” He scowls and turns to Jin Wen and Jin Xia, demanding, “Are you going to let him talk to your older brother like this? You’re so unfilial!”

They glance at each other, shrug, and go running. Lan Sizhui tries to scramble out of the way, but they change direction at the last second, pushing Jin Ling over into the water. He howls, using cultivation trained instincts to grab the front of both their robes and drag them in with him.

A-jie sighs. Jin Zixuan tries to look like he doesn’t want to laugh.

Ninghong and Nuying are smiling as they come over. Lan Sizhui isn’t a fool and keeps his distance. No one seems to notice Lan Suyin slowly creeping closer. “As the future sect leader of the Jiang,” Ninghong announces, “no one is going to be pushing anyone into any ponds.”

Nuying’s eyes light up and Jiang Cheng isn’t even a little bit surprised when she twists and pushes her sister into the pond. Ninghong shouts, ensuring she gets a mouthful of pond water for her trouble. The Jin siblings swim a little bit back to get out of range although they of course stay in the pond. Getting back out after being pushed in goes against the spirit of the game.

Kind, gentle Lan Sizhui waits until Nuying is distracted by laughing at her sister’s outrage to dart towards her and shove her forward, quickly getting out of grabbing range as she stumbles and falls on top of her sister in the pond. Lan Wangji winces. Or the skin near his left eye tightens briefly, which is the same thing.

“Do not feel bad, my young cousins,” he says in a ridiculous, pompous voice that Jiang Cheng knows is just him imitating Lan Jingyi at his most obnoxious. Lan Jingyi, an official member of The Cousins even though neither of his parents is a Jiang sibling, is currently on a nighthunt with his father. Lan Sizhui has been doing his best to pretend like he’s not sulking that he hadn’t been able to go too, which is probably why he let himself get goaded into this to begin with. “I am older, and wiser, and one day you too will – AH!”

There’s a splash and delighted, mocking laughter from the rest of them as Lan Sizhui comes to the surface, sputtering as he pushes his hair from his face.

“Suyin wins,” Lan Suyin says smugly.

Her smugness only lasts until her cousins and brother pull themselves soaking wet onto the pier and give chase. The kids all disappear around the corner, Suyin’s delighted shrieks echoing around them, and then several thumps and someone’s very much not delighted groan. He thinks it might be Li Jun, but usually he’s quick enough to avoid the kids on a rampage.

“That would have all been very forbidden in Cloud Recesses,” Jin Zixuan says, lips twitching.

Lan Wangji sighs. “We are not in Cloud Recesses.”

Wei Wuxian snorts, then shifts so that really, it would just be less embarrassing for everyone if he just sat in Lan Wangji’s lap rather than draping and curling himself all over him like this. “Lan Qiren says he’s writing a new set of rules just for The Cousins. I can’t tell if he’s joking.”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji says gravely, “you know that Uncle does not joke.”

That wasn’t a joke either, but it still makes them all laugh.

~

Jiang Cheng doesn’t make note of the date. Even if he had, he wouldn’t have thought anything about it.

Which means he’s not expecting it when his brother bursts into his room in the middle of the night, especially since he’s supposed to be in Cloud Recesses. He’s shifted to place himself in front of A-Qing and Zidian is sparking to life before he realizes who it is and then he’s just confused, the adrenaline spike receding and leaving him exhausted. “Wei Wuxian, what the fuck is going on?”

A-Qing has pushed herself upright in bed besides him, calm as always, even with this.

Wei Wuxian is shaking, tears falling down his face, and Jiang Cheng goes cold. “What’s wrong? Who’s hurt?” Anything that can devastate his brother like this is going to be equally devastating to him.

He lunges for him, pressing his face into Jiang Cheng’s chest, and he’s so confused but he wraps his arms around his shoulders, letting his brother curl into him. He’s freezing. He must have flown here. “Nothing,” he hiccups, “no one’s hurt. Sorry. It’s fine. It’s,” he shakes his head and holds Jiang Cheng tighter and then laugh, but it sounds a touch hysterical. “It’s just a nightmare.”

A-Qing frowns and reaches out to rub Wei Wuxian’s back. He shudders but doesn’t flinch away from her touch and she says, “I’m going to go make some tea,” in a heavy sort of way that implies she’ll be busy making tea for far longer than she’ll need to be.

He nods his thanks and waits until she’s closed the door behind her. “A-Xian. What’s wrong?”

“You did it,” he says quietly, taking several deep breathes to calm himself down. “I was so scared, but you really did it. I can’t believe it even worked. I was half mad when I wrote that spell. What were you thinking?”

Jiang Cheng can’t breathe. He loves his brother. He loves his brother in any and every timeline, but the idea that he’s lost the one he’s lived with for nearly twenty years is terrifying. Grief claws at his chest and his lips are numb when he asks, “Is he gone?”

How will he explain this to anyone? To their family, to Wei Wuxian's husband, to the son he barely got the chance to raise the first time around and the daughter he's never met?

Wei Wuxian is a genius. The question doesn't really make sense, but he understands anyway, and then he's pulling back enough to cup Jiang Cheng's face, using his thumb to brush tears from his cheeks that he hadn't even realized he'd been crying. "Oh, A-Cheng." That's enough. Relief makes his legs weak, until they shift so it's Wei Wuxian keeping him upright. The Wei Wuxian of the old timeline would never call him A-Cheng even if he'd wanted to. "Fuck, sorry, I didn't – no. I just, it's just some bleed through from the spell, now that time has caught up with itself. You used my golden core for this and I was the focal point, of course there was blowback." He laughs and this time it sounds closer to normal. "I thought it was a nightmare, but I was awake and it was all a little too vivid for that."

"I'm sorry," he says, and this is better, his brother isn't gone, but it still hurts. Wei Wuxian still has to remember how everyone turned against him. How they killed the people he wanted to protect. How they'd killed him. How Jiang Cheng had killed him. "I wanted – I didn't want you to have to – I wanted a better life. For all of us."

"You gave us one," Wei Wuxian says. "I don't mind remembering. Hasn't it been lonely for you? Being the only one who knew how things used to be?"

Yes. But compared to the loneliness of before, when he'd only had Jin Ling, it hadn't mattered much. He has so much *more* now than he's ever had. If he has nightmares he can't explain to anyone, if things make him sad for no reason that the people around him understand, well, they did go through a war. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," Wei Wuxian says. "Did you ever tell anyone?"

He snorts and shakes his head. "Why would I? To tell them they used to be miserable or dead?"

"A-Cheng," he sighs, scolding and fond.

"Are you going to tell Lan Wangji?" he challenges. "Are you going to tell him of how he mourned you every day for sixteen years and raised your son alone? That every day you've spent together this time is a day you spent apart before?"

Wei Wuxian's breath hitches. "I'm – he's going to need an explanation about why I flew through the night to get here, because I certainly didn't give him one before I left. But I might be, ah, not so detailed, maybe. But you shouldn't have had to deal with this alone."

"I wasn't," he says, and he means it. He hadn't been alone from second he'd returned, crouching next to Lan Wangji and watching his brother through a broken roof. He'd had Wei Wuxian, and A-jie, and so many others, and this time he'd gotten to keep them. "Besides, even if I was, you're here now."

Wei Wuxian smiles, soft and warm. "Yeah. I am." He pulls him into another hug, this one not crushing, and Jiang Cheng huffs but it's lost a bit in the way he hugs him back. "Jiang Cheng. You did a good job, a far better one than I could have."

“Shut up,” he says, hating how it comes out choked.

Wei Wuxian laughs, looking at him like he did when they were kids getting in trouble at Cloud Recesses, and how he’d looked at him in that temple when Jiang Cheng had first yelled at him about his golden core, and how he looks at him every time their children get into another fight at dinner. So many things have changed, but how his brother loves him hasn’t, and if he’d had to change the world so it was a place where his brother’s love was something he got to keep, well.

Being a Jiang means attempting the impossible, after all.

## Chapter End Notes

yes, jc and wq did name their daughters after their brothers

well, that's the end! this is so bittersweet. remember when i started this and it was just going to be a quick yunmeng bros one shot? and now it's this! a 100k meta sibling love monster!!

i want to thank everyone who took the time to read and review this. your enthusiasm and support and wonderful, kind words are all that got me through writing all this, and i hope this was a satisfying ending for all of you

i hope you liked it! you can follow/harass me at: [shanastoryteller.tumblr.com](https://shanastoryteller.tumblr.com)



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